

Head and Neck Radiation Treatment

Head and Neck Radiation Treatment

We strongly recommend not drinking alcohol, chewing tobacco, smoking or vaping as these will increase your mouth and throat side effects and affect how your treatment works. Let your healthcare team know if you are interested in quitting.

The next few pages will explain:

- Benefits of mouth care
- How to practice good mouth care
- Side effects
- Supportive care
- Sexuality
- How to care for yourself after treatment is complete

Benefits of mouth care

- Keeps your teeth, gums and mouth clean.
- Maintains comfort and reduces pain.
- Helps your mouth heal after treatment.
- Reduces side effects such as:
 - › Cavities
 - › Soreness in the mouth and throat
 - › Small sores (ulcers) lining the mouth or throat
 - › Bleeding or infection
 - › Dry mouth and lips
 - › Thick mucus and saliva

How to practice good mouth care

- Examine your mouth every day. Report any changes to your healthcare team.

- **Rinse your mouth**

- › Homemade bland mouthwash (the 411 mouthwash):
 - 4 cups of water
 - 1 teaspoon of salt
 - 1 teaspoon of baking soda
- › Measure water, salt and baking soda into a jar. Mix until dissolved. Cover with a lid.
- › Write the date the 411 mouthwash was made on the jar.
- › Store the 411 mouthwash on the counter.
- › Throw away any unused 411 mouthwash after 2 days.
- › Rinse your mouth, gargle and then spit. Repeat 2-3 times. Do this every 1-2 hours, as necessary.
- › Use the 411 mouthwash to keep your mouth moist and clean and your saliva thinner.
- › Use the 411 mouthwash or plain water to rinse after eating.
- › Use the 411 mouthwash or plain water to rinse after vomiting.
- › You may also be prescribed mouthwash by your doctor as needed for pain or infection.
- › Do not use any mouthwash containing alcohol.
- › Tell your healthcare team if you are unable to use the 411 mouthwash.

- **Brush your teeth and tongue**

- › If you cannot tolerate brushing, inform your healthcare team. In this case, you may use oral swabs dipped in the 411 mouthwash or warm water.
- › Brush your teeth gently 2-4 times a day for at least 2 minutes.
- › Brush your teeth after each meal and before bedtime. If this is not possible, rinse your mouth with the 411 mouthwash or plain water.
- › Brush your tongue from back to front.
- › Limit high sugar foods/drinks/candy/gum. Any intake of high sugar drinks/ foods should be taken with meals and mouth rinsed afterwards.
- › Use a small soft or ultra-soft toothbrush; do not use an electric toothbrush.

- › Use a new toothbrush at the start of your radiation treatments. Change your toothbrush every 2 months or sooner if the bristles look worn or bent.
- › If needed, place your toothbrush under hot water for 30 seconds to soften the bristles.
- › If toothpaste causes discomfort, soak your toothbrush in the 411 mouthwash before brushing.
- › Use fluoride toothpaste with mild flavoring and no whitening agent.
- › If you have a mouth infection, replace your toothbrush as soon as the infection starts. Replace it again once the infection has cleared.

- **Denture and partial denture care**
 - › Remove before starting your mouth care.
 - › Remove for at least 8 hours per day (example: overnight).
 - › Soak in water or a rinse solution.
 - › Brush gently 2-4 times a day for at least 2 minutes.
 - › Brush with toothpaste and toothbrush or mild liquid dish soap.
 - › If your mouth is sore, do not wear your dentures or partial dentures. If the soreness does not go away in 10-14 days, tell your doctor.
 - › Your dentures or partial dentures may not fit well anymore. Do not wear if they are too small or too big. See your dentist/denturist for advice when your mouth is healed.

- **Use of dental floss/toothpicks**
 - › Do not start using dental floss if you do not usually use it.
 - › Do not use dental floss if your platelets are low.
 - › Do not use dental floss if your doctor tells you not to.
 - › Use dental floss once daily before brushing your teeth (if possible at bedtime).
 - › Choose waxed dental floss as it is easier to use.
 - › Stop using dental floss if it causes pain or bleeding that lasts more than 2 minutes.
 - › Do not use toothpicks while on treatment.

- **Feeding Tube**

- › Sometimes a feeding tube may be required. If you need a feeding tube, you will be given more information and support.

Side Effects

Side Effect	Timing of Side Effect	What to do
Thickened saliva, dry mouth	<p>Starts within the first 2 weeks of radiation treatment</p> <p>Improves within 1-2 years after radiation treatment but may be permanent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak with a Dietitian for food/liquid suggestions as needed • Sip water throughout the day. Take small sips often. Have a water bottle with you. • Rinse mouth with recommended mouthwashes • Try sugarless candy or gum • Try products that help with dry mouth such as Oral Balance Gel® and Biotene® spray. Follow instructions that come with the product • Increase air humidity at home/work by using a cool mist humidifier throughout the day and night • Follow tips under the “How to practice Good Mouth Care” section, page 1

Side Effect	Timing of Side Effect	What to do
Taste and Smell Changes	<p>Starts within the first 2 weeks of radiation treatment</p> <p>Improves within 1 year after radiation treatment but may be permanent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak with a Dietitian for food/liquid suggestions as needed
Sore Lips	Varies- Depending on your radiation treatment plan, you may not experience sore lips	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your healthcare team if you need to use specific lip care products. If so, they must be water based, scent-free, lanolin-free, and alcohol-free, such as KY Jelly® • Do not use aloe, oil or petroleum jelly based products • If lips are broken down or blistered notify your healthcare team • Do not touch sores on your lips • Do not lick your lips
Sore mouth/ throat	<p>Starts within 2-3 weeks of radiation treatment</p> <p>Peaks 1-2 weeks after radiation treatment completes</p> <p>Typically resolves 4-6 weeks after completion of radiation treatment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak with a Dietitian for food/liquid suggestions as needed • Use a pain reliever you would normally take such as Tylenol® or Advil®. If needed, you may be given a prescription by your doctor. • Rinse mouth with recommended mouthwashes • Tell your healthcare team if you have bleeding, sores, or white patches in your mouth

Side Effect	Timing of Side Effect	What to do?
Sore mouth/ throat (Continued)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have a Speech Language Pathologist involved in your care, they will continue to help you • Follow tips under the “How to practice Good Mouth Care” section, page 1
Difficulty Swallowing	<p>Starts within 2-3 weeks of radiation treatment</p> <p>Peaks 1-2 weeks after radiation treatment completes</p> <p>Improvement varies, may be permanent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak with a Dietitian for food/liquid suggestions as needed • Use a pain reliever you would normally take such as Tylenol® or Advil®. If needed, you may be given a prescription by your doctor. • If you have a Speech Language Pathologist involved in your care, they will continue to help you
Nose and sinus irritation	Varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put saline into your nostrils but do not force if there is resistance. Ask your healthcare team how • Apply a water based, scent-free, lanolin-free, and alcohol-free product such as KY Jelly® to the inside of nostrils as needed
Fatigue	Varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See “Cancer-Related Fatigue” handout

Side Effect	Timing of Side Effect	What to do?
Voice changes	Varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rest your voice as much as possible • Increase air humidity at home/work by using a cool mist humidifier • If you are experiencing hoarseness, it may get worse before it gets better
Jaw Stiffness	Varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with your healthcare team
Hair Loss	Varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depending on your radiation treatment plan, you may experience hair loss in the treatment area

Supportive Care

- Your emotional health and well-being are important as you go through your treatments.
- There is support available at the Cancer Centre for you and/or your family to help cope with cancer, emotions you are experiencing, stress, lifestyle changes, financial concerns or medication coverage
- At any time, you can ask your Doctor, Nurse or Radiation Therapist to refer you to this support team. You will then receive a call from a member of the team to set up a separate appointment.

Sexuality

- Throughout treatment and recovery, you and your partner may experience changes that affect your sexual health.
- Throughout treatment and recovery, you may notice periods of time when you have little interest in sex. This may be upsetting for you and your partner.
- If you are single, you may have different worries and challenges such as how to talk about sexuality and cancer with a new partner.
- If you or your partner would like more information about how your treatment and recovery might affect sexual activity, please ask your healthcare team.

How to care for yourself after treatment is complete

Please continue to refer to this handout as you heal from your treatment. If issues arise, contact a member of your healthcare team.



Looking for more health information?

Find this brochure and all our patient resources here: <http://library.nshealth.ca/cancer>

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

*Nova Scotia Health promotes a smoke-free, vape-free, and scent-free environment.
Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!*

Nova Scotia Health
www.nshealth.ca

*Prepared by: Horizon Health, Prince Edward Island Cancer Treatment Centre,
Nova Scotia Health Cancer Care Program and Vitalite Health Network Cancer Care*

Approved by: Nova Scotia Cancer Patient Education Committee

Designed by: Cancer Care Program Staff

The information in this brochure is for informational and educational purposes only.

The information is not intended to be and does not constitute health care or medical advice.

If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider. The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.

NSCCP-1700 Updated May 2021 ©Nova Scotia Health

