

# What to Do for Mouth Sores

Mouth sores can be a common side effect of cancer treatment. You might have soreness, or little cuts or ulcers can form. These mouth sores can become infected and can bleed. They often get worse over time and can be very painful. They can make it hard for you to eat, swallow, drink, or even talk.



## What to look for

Sores in the mouth that may be red, or may have small white patches in the middle. These sores can be painful or hurt when you chew, or feel like a sore throat. The sores may bleed or become infected.

- Small ulcers, swelling, or bleeding in the mouth, on the gums, or on or under the tongue
- A white or yellow film, patches, or pus in the mouth or on the tongue
- More mucus in the mouth than usual
- A feeling of dryness, burning, or pain when you eat hot and cold foods
- Heartburn or indigestion



## What causes mouth sores in people with cancer?

Mouth sores can be caused by chemotherapy, targeted drug therapy, some immunotherapy, and radiation treatments to the head and neck area. Other things may also cause mouth sores: certain infections, dehydration, poor mouth care, oxygen therapy, alcohol or tobacco use, or a lack of certain vitamins or protein.



## Dental checkups and mouth care

Dental checkups before treatment, and especially before head and neck radiation therapy, can help prevent and reduce mouth sores. Dentists can show you how to care for your mouth. They can also treat cavities or infections in your mouth before cancer treatment starts. It's important to

talk to your cancer care team about the best treatment for your situation.

Good mouth care can help reduce the risk of mouth sores. It can also help keep mouth sores from getting very bad. Using a soft toothbrush can help keep your mouth clean and reduce the risk of injuring your gums and lining of the mouth.

Start taking care of your mouth before it gets sore. If your mouth does get sores, good mouth care can help keep it from getting infected.



## What you can do if you have mouth sores

### To take care of your mouth

- Use a mouth rinse that your cancer care team suggests.
- Drink at least 8 cups of liquids each day, if your cancer care team says it's OK.
- Certain types of rinses can help keep your mouth clean and can help soothe discomfort. Mouth rinses with antibiotics or steroids might be recommended if your mouth sores are painful or infected.
- Ask if it is OK to floss.
- If you wear dentures, you may be told to remove and clean your dentures between meals on a regular time schedule, and to store them in a cleansing soak.
- Keep your lips moist with petroleum jelly, a mild lip balm, or cocoa butter.
- If you have pain, take your pain medicines as directed.

## When you eat

- Eat soft, moist foods that are easy to swallow.
- Avoid eating foods that are very salty, spicy, or sugary.
- Eat small, frequent meals of bland, moist, non-spicy foods. Do not eat raw vegetables and fruits or other hard, dry, or crusty foods, such as chips or pretzels.
- Avoid acidic fruits and fruit juices, like orange, grapefruit, and tomato. These can irritate the mouth.
- Avoid fizzy drinks, alcohol, and tobacco.

## Talk to your cancer care team if

- You have redness in your mouth that lasts for more than 48 hours.
- You have a fever. Ask your cancer care team what temperature is a fever.
- You have bleeding gums.
- You notice any type of cut or sore in your mouth.

- You have white patches on the tongue or inside your mouth.
- You have trouble eating food or drinking liquids for 2 days.
- You have trouble taking your medicines because of mouth sores.

## Treatment of mouth sores

More research is needed to find the best treatment for mouth sores and pain. Good mouth care and mouth rinses are helpful to most people. For others, reducing treatment doses, cryotherapy, or laser therapy may lower the risk of mouth sores or help with healing.



### Talk to your cancer care team.

Tell your cancer care team about changes you notice in your mouth, such as you're not able to eat or drink for 2 days, you have a fever, or severe pain. Let them know what makes your mouth sores feel worse or better.

For cancer information and answers, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

