

Head and neck cancer and your oral health



This fact sheet explains oral complications which occur as a result of head and neck cancer treatment and what you can do to minimise these complications.

Your dental practitioner needs to become part of your cancer care team.

A pre-treatment oral examination (check-up) is recommended for all head and neck cancer patients.

Why do I need a pre-treatment check-up?

Having a healthy mouth before your cancer treatment commences is advised.

Your dental practitioner will complete a comprehensive oral examination (check-up) and formulate an oral health care plan. This plan will allow for the healing of any necessary treatment sites and help you establish a good oral health regime.

What oral complications may occur as a result of radiation therapy?

You may experience one or more of these complications:

* **Dry mouth (xerostomia):**

Often due to decreased saliva flow or changes in the amount of saliva produced. Radiation therapy may adversely affect the salivary glands and change the quality and quantity of your saliva. Dry mouth also increases the risk of tooth decay and gum disease.

* **Tooth decay:** Saliva is the body's natural defence against tooth decay. Without adequate saliva to lubricate

the mouth, wash away food, and neutralise the acids produced by plaque, your teeth are at greater risk of tooth decay.

* **Mucositis:** Occurs when cancer treatments break down the cells lining the gastro-intestinal tract, leaving the mucosal tissue inflamed and at risk of ulceration and infection. The most common site for mucositis is the mouth.

* **Taste changes:** During cancer treatment your sense of taste may alter. This complication is often reversible after treatment is completed.

* **Trismus:** A temporary condition that limits the ability to open your mouth. Restricted ability to open your mouth will affect what you can eat and therefore your nutritional intake, your ability to speak and swallow and your ability to undertake effective oral hygiene practices.

* **Osteoradionecrosis:** The necrosis (or death of cells) of bone resulting from exposure to radiation treatment. Patients should

avoid invasive surgical procedures, including extractions that involve irradiated bone.

What oral complications may occur as a result of chemotherapy?

* **Neurotoxicity:** An adverse effect on the nervous system which can cause a persistent aching or burning sensation that mimics a toothache, however no dental source can be found.

* **Bleeding:** Oral bleeding may occur as a result of decreased platelets and clotting factors.

Will I need any tooth extractions?

Your oral health care plan will include any proposed tooth extractions. Your dental practitioner will inform you of any risks involved with a proposed treatment and the benefits to having treatment such as tooth extractions prior to the commencement of your cancer treatment. Irradiated bone may not heal after a tooth extraction and therefore, careful consideration is given to teeth that may be in the radiation beam.

Other relevant information:

- * Dentures may need to be reconstructed if your cancer treatment has altered your oral tissues.
- * Quit smoking: For assistance, contact Quitline on 13 QUIT (13 78 48) or visit www.health.qld.gov.au/quitsmoking

What should I do to minimise the oral complications of my cancer treatment?

- * Gently brush teeth, gums and tongue with a soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste after every meal and before bed.
- * Clean between your teeth every day. Use floss or an interdental brush.
- * Avoid mouthwashes containing alcohol.
- * Speak to your dental practitioner if you are suffering from dry mouth. They will be able to advise you on products to reduce the effects of dry mouth.
- * Follow your dental practitioner's instructions for the use of home care products.
- * Rinse the mouth with a baking soda solution several times a day and after meals and snacks (see below for recipe).

Bicarbonate soda mouth-rinse (baking soda solution)

Combine 1 teaspoon of bicarbonate soda and 250ml of water. Mix well.

If you are making this solution at home, you should make up a new mix each day.

- * If you feel tightness or a restriction on opening your mouth, consult your medical practitioner or speech pathologist who can provide you with information and appropriate exercises to help reduce this complication.
- * Eat well balanced, healthy meals and snacks. Try to limit snacks which are sugary and acidic. If sugary and acidic snacks are consumed, rinse your mouth with baking soda solution afterwards.
- * Avoid tobacco products and alcohol.
- * Keep the appointment schedule recommended by your dental practitioner.

Remember

High-dose radiation treatment carries a lifelong risk of dry mouth (xerostomia), dental decay, and osteoradionecrosis.

For more information about your oral health:

Contact:

Your dental practitioner

Visit:

www.health.qld.gov.au/oralhealth

Call:

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84)
for confidential health advice
24 hours a day, seven days a week

Email:

oral_health@health.qld.gov.au

For information and support about cancer:

Cancer Council Helpline

By calling the Cancer Council Helpline callers can receive professional support, enhanced knowledge about cancer, booklets and brochures about cancer or a referral to the Cancer Council Queensland support and information services listed below.

Peer Support Programs

Peer Support Programs provide people affected by cancer with support from another person who has experienced similar circumstances.

Cancer Counselling Service

Cancer Council Queensland offers a specialist **Cancer Counselling Service** for those individuals who require specialist support and is delivered through time limited therapy with a trained psychologist.

To find out more about either of these services call the Cancer Council Helpline on **13 11 20**.

Cancer Council Resources

Cancer Council Queensland provides a comprehensive range of cancer booklets, leaflets and brochures which can support people affected by cancer. To view, download and order Cancer Council Queensland resources online, go to www.cancerqld.org.au Alternatively, you can call the Helpline to learn more about the available resources and place an order, on **13 11 20**.

The State of Queensland, Queensland Health, 2010.