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How to Manage Your

# Mouth Problems



## This patient guide will help you understand:

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This patient guide is for people who have cancer-related mouth problems before, during, or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients, family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

# What are cancer-related mouth problems?

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## The most common mouth problems for people with cancer are:

Dry mouth and lips

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Mouth sores

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Cold sores

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Sticky saliva

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Taste changes

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Trouble or pain with swallowing

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Too much saliva (spit)

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Tooth and gum problems

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A stiff jaw

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Bad breath

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Burning mouth

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Feeling thirsty all the time

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Many mouth problems caused by cancer treatment will get better over time with proper treatment and care.

### Be safe!

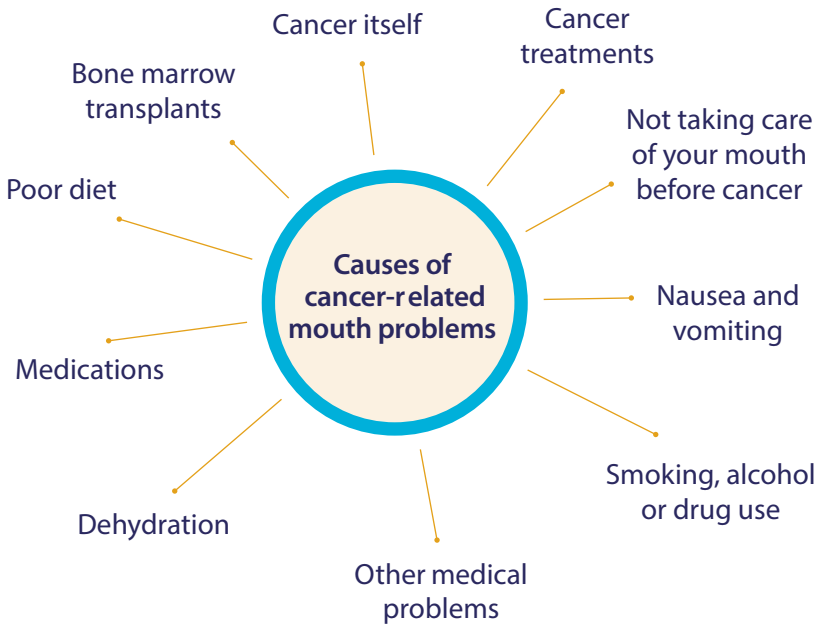
- ✓ If you notice changes in your swallowing, like gagging or choking on food, ask for a referral to a speech language pathologist right away.

# What causes cancer-related mouth problems?

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It is important to find and treat the causes that may be making your mouth problems worse.

**This picture shows things that can cause mouth problems:**



# What can I do to help my mouth problems?

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## Go to the dentist

Make sure that your mouth is healthy before you start cancer treatments.



Dental problems can cause delays or changes in your treatment schedule.

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Tell your dentist that you are getting cancer treatments so that they can get any special instructions from your cancer care team. This is especially important if you have head and neck cancer or if you are on active chemotherapy.

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## Keep your mouth clean

Keep your teeth, gums and mouth as clean as you can while you are getting cancer treatments.



### Be safe!

- ✔ To avoid infections, keep brushing and flossing even when your mouth is uncomfortable. Ask your health care team about medicines that can numb your mouth to make it more comfortable.

## Rinse your mouth

Rinse your mouth with your homemade mouth rinse:

- Every 1-2 hours if your mouth is dry or sore. Otherwise 4-5 times a day.
- Every 4 hours overnight, only if you are already awake.
- Right after eating meals or snacks.

Put some of your mouth rinse into a smaller bottle to take with you when you go out.

Consider using a cool-mist humidifier at night if you find yourself waking up to have a sip of water.

Do not use mouthwashes with alcohol (like Scope and Listerine). They can dry out your mouth.

## How to make your homemade mouth rinse

### Mix together in a clean jug or jar:

- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 1 teaspoon of baking soda
- 4 cups of water

### Keep your mouth rinse at room temperature and make a fresh batch every day.

- This rinse is the best thing to moisturize your mouth and keep it clean. You do not need to buy special dry mouth products.
- The baking soda keeps your mouth at a healthy pH, which helps prevent yeast infections in your mouth.

## If you wear dentures

- Do not wear them if they do not fit well.
- Brush and rinse your dentures after eating.
- Have loose dentures adjusted.
- Remove your dentures if you have mouth sores.
- Remove your dentures at night while you are sleeping.

### Brush your teeth

Brush your teeth, gums and tongue after eating and before bed.

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Use a small, soft, rounded-end, bristled toothbrush.

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If your mouth is sore, run hot water over your toothbrush to soften the bristles before brushing.

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Change your toothbrush when the bristles do not stand up straight or after you have been treated for an oral yeast infection.

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### Floss your teeth

If you already floss, keep flossing at least once per day. Do not start flossing now if you never have before.

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Use a waxed floss.

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### Other tips:

Wash your hands often and keep them away from your mouth.

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Limit stress and sunlight if you have cold sores or have gotten them in the past.

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Do not touch any lip sores. Tell your health care team about them.

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**Tell your health care team** if your gums bleed for longer than 2 minutes after brushing and flossing.

### Patient Story:

“When my mouth was really painful I ate pureed foods using a baby spoon. When I felt like my mouth was too sore to brush I bought a very soft toothbrush made for babies. It made brushing easier. It felt so good to have a clean mouth!”

## Keep your mouth and lips moist



### Moisturize your mouth

Use your homemade mouth rinse (page 5) to keep your mouth moist. You do not need to buy a special mouthwash for dry mouth.

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If you suck on lozenges, make sure they are sugar free (sweeteners like Xylitol are okay).

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Ask your doctor if an artificial saliva (spit) product is right for you (like Salagen).

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### Moisturize your lips

Keep your lips moist so they do not chap and crack.

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Use animal or plant based lip balms with bees-wax, lanolin or cocoa butter.

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Put on the lip balm after brushing and flossing at bedtime, and as needed.

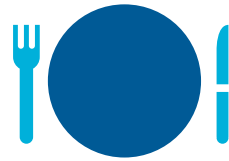
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Do not use petroleum based lip balm.

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## Change your diet

Eating and drinking can be uncomfortable if you have mouth problems from cancer and treatment.



### Make each mouthful count.

You may only be able to eat a few bites at a time, so choose calorie and protein rich food and drinks.

To keep up your strength, you need to keep eating even when it is painful.

### Tip:

If eating is painful, ask your health care team to help you time your pain medication so it starts working before meals. This might make it easier to eat.

For more information about getting more calories and protein see our Loss of Appetite guide at: [www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)





### **Tips for eating when you have a sore mouth:**

Have room temperature food and drinks instead of hot or cold.

Cook your food until it is soft.

Try mashing, blending, chopping or grinding your food to make it softer.

Moisten food by adding olive oil, sauce, broth, sour cream, gravy or cream soup.

Do not eat spicy or acidic foods (like citrus, pickles or tomatoes) or drink fizzy drinks.

Avoid foods that are rough, dry or have sharp edges that might scratch.

### **Tips for eating when you have a dry mouth:**

Carry a water bottle, thermos or travel mug so you can drink whenever your mouth feels dry.

Warm liquids may help to clear thick saliva and wash down your food.

Suck on sugarless hard candies, mints or chew gum to make saliva.

Use extra olive oil, sauces, broths or gravies to add extra moisture to foods.

Dunk solid foods in soup, milk or warm drinks to soften them.

Avoid caffeine (coffee, tea, and cola), alcohol and smoking. They can make your dry mouth worse.

#### **Be safe!**

#### **Always check with your health care team before crushing pills.**

If it is hard to swallow pills, ask for your medication in a liquid. If your health care teams says it is safe, you can mix crushed pills with applesauce or pudding, or put them through your feeding tube.

### Foods to try if you have a sore or dry mouth

<b>Breakfast</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Soft eggs – poached, scrambled or cooked in an omelette</li><li>✓ Cottage cheese and yogurt</li><li>✓ French toast or pancakes</li></ul>
<b>Lunch &amp; Dinner</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Soft main courses like soups, stews, casseroles, mild pastas, perogies or congee</li><li>✓ Soft vegetables like mashed potatoes, cream style corn, cooked sweet potato or squash</li><li>✓ Canned, flaked or pureed meats or fish mixed with mayonnaise, cream soup or sauce</li></ul> <p><b>TIP</b> Add grated cheese or silken tofu to vegetables, soups and casseroles</p>
<b>Snacks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Egg or tuna salad, guacamole, hummus, cream cheese</li><li>✓ Custard, pudding, milkshakes, smoothies</li><li>✓ Ripe pears, peaches, bananas</li></ul>

### Tips for eating when you have taste changes

Eat foods that need less chewing.

Taste foods at different temperatures since the flavour may change.

Try different forms of foods, like fresh, frozen or canned.

Experiment with foods, spices and seasonings.

Try foods more than once. For most people, changes in taste do get better.

**If food tastes bland:**

- Add spices and condiments.
- Try tart food like lemon juice or vinegar (unless you have mouth sores).
- Eat strong flavored foods like chocolate, salsa, pickles, olives or marinated meats.

**If everything tastes too sweet:**

- Dilute liquids with milk or water.
- Add salt, nutmeg, cinnamon or drops of lemon, lime, orange juice or vinegar (unless you have mouth sores).
- Try milder tastes like plain yogurt.

**If food tastes salty:**

- Try low salt and sodium reduced products.
- Add a bit of sugar to foods such as soups, gravy, juices, casseroles or potatoes.

**If food tastes metallic:**

- Try meatless sources of protein like baked beans, legumes, lentils, yogurt, eggs, hummus, peanut or other nut butters.
- Use plastic utensils, chopsticks and glass cookware instead of metal.
- Eat meat, poultry and fish with tart foods like lemon or lime juice, cranberry sauce or pickles (unless you have mouth sores).
- Use sugarless lemon candies, mints and chewing gum to get rid of a metallic aftertaste.

**Ask your health care team to refer you to a registered dietitian.**

A dietitian can help you find ways to eat well when you are having mouth problems. You can also visit [www.EatRightOntario.ca](http://www.EatRightOntario.ca) or call **1-877-510-5102** to connect with a registered dietitian for free.

## Quit smoking

Smoking can make your mouth problems worse but quitting is hard.



### Your pharmacist or family doctor can help you make a plan to quit smoking. They can:

Suggest nicotine replacements  
(like the patch or gum)

Help you keep track of your  
progress

Prescribe medication to help  
you quit

### Here are some other resources to help you:

- Smokers Helpline, Canadian Cancer Society  
[www.smokershelpline.ca](http://www.smokershelpline.ca)
- Quit Smoking  
<http://www.quitsmoking.com>

# When should I talk to my health care team?

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## **Tell your health care team right away if you have any of these symptoms:**

A fever of 38.3°C (100.9°F) or higher at any time **or** 38.0°C (100.4°F) or higher for at least one hour

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Strong pain in your mouth or jaw

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Swelling, numbness or heaviness in the jaw

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Trouble with swallowing

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A choking feeling

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White patches or red/swollen areas in your mouth

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If you are not coping well with pain

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Your health care team wants to hear about your mouth problems. Your questions and concerns are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

## **What is symptom screening?**

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

# Where can I get more information?

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For links to these and other helpful resources go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

### Cancer Care Ontario

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### Canadian Cancer Society

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

1-888-939-3333

### Ontario Dental Association

[www.youroralhealth.ca](http://www.youroralhealth.ca)

### Eat Right Ontario

[www.eatrightontario.ca](http://www.eatrightontario.ca)

1-877-510-5102

## Support services:

### Canadian Cancer Society

#### Peer Support Service

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### Cancer Chat Canada

[www.cancerchatcanada.ca](http://www.cancerchatcanada.ca)

## Books:

### Eating well when you have cancer

[www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

### Goes Down Easy:

#### Recipes to help you cope with the challenge of eating during cancer treatment —

Elise Mecklinger, 2006

**Ask your health care team for more information about managing mouth problems.**

Self-management classes:

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Local support groups:

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Videos:

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Books:

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**Ask your health care team who you should contact if you feel that your mouth problems need care right away.**

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The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Ideas to help dry mouth, Ideas to cope with taste changes, Ideas to help manage sore mouth (North York General)
- Mouth care, Sore mouth and swallowing difficulties, Taste changes (London Health Sciences Centre)
- Tips to help you manage your mouth care (The Ottawa Hospital)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about mouth problems. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing mouth problems. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

### **Need this information in an accessible format?**

1-855-460-2647 | TTY 416-217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:

**[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)**

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