Cancer Therapy: Managing Side Effects – Dry Mouth and Thick Saliva

Certain cancer treatments may affect the glands that make saliva. This can make your mouth dry or cause thick saliva. It may become hard to swallow, eat or talk. When your mouth is dry, your body makes thick saliva and mucus to help keep it moist.

Dry mouth and thick saliva often improve after you complete treatment. It may take time for these symptoms go away. It is important to talk with your health care team about any symptoms you have during or after treatment.

Talk with your doctor about when to see a dentist before you start chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

Tips to Help with Dry Mouth and Thick Saliva

- Eat foods that are soft, moist or pureed. Soften your foods with liquids, such as gravy, sauce or yogurt.
- Chew on sugar-free gum or suck on hard candy (sour flavors).
- Drink 8 to 10 cups of non-caffeinated fluid, such as water, sport drinks or electrolyte solutions (Pedialyte), each day to stay hydrated.
- **Do not** drink more than 1 caffeinated drink each day. Caffeine is in coffee, tea and soda pop.
- Use a cool-mist humidifier close to your bed at night. This will help put moisture into the air you breathe.
- Try over-the-counter saliva substitutes, such as Biotene. These products are available as mouthwashes, toothpastes, gels and mouth sprays.
- Use over-the-counter lozenges, such as Xylitol or Xylimelts.

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- Rinse your mouth with clear, carbonated fluids. (See the homemade mouthwash recipe provided.) Do not use store bought mouth wash (Listerine, etc.) as these contain alcohol and will dry your mouth out.
- Brush your teeth with toothpaste and a soft toothbrush in the morning, evening, and after meals.
- Use over-the-counter medicines to help thin your saliva, such as Mucinex or Robitussin (Guaifenesin). It is important to drink plenty of water when you take these medicines. **Do not** use medicines with a decongestant, such as Benadryl. This can make your symptoms worse. Follow the directions on the box and **do not** take more than 2400 mg each day.

Rinse Your Mouth with a Homemade Mouthwash

A homemade mouthwash may also help with this problem. Here are 2 recipes you can use:

- **Salt Water and Baking Soda**
  - Mix 1 cup (8 fluid ounces) of water with ½ teaspoon of salt and ½ teaspoon of baking soda. **Do not** use salt if it burns your mouth.
  - Swish the mixture in your mouth for 30 seconds and then gargle.
  - Spit out the mouthwash.
  - Use this mouthwash after meals, up to 6 times each day.
  - Make a new mouthwash mixture each day and store it in a clean, covered container. Shake the mixture before each use. The mouthwash can sit out at room temperature for up to 24 hours.

- **Green Tea**
  - Brew strong green tea and let it cool. **Do not** add any sweeteners.
    - You may add organic Amla (Indian Gooseberry) to your green tea mixture. Use 30 milliliters, ½ teaspoon or 1 crushed tablet of Amla to every cup of green tea.
  - Swish the mixture in your mouth for 30 seconds and then gargle.
  - Spit out the mouthwash.
  - Use this mouthwash as often as needed.
  - Store the mouthwash in a clean, covered container. Shake the mixture before each use. You may keep the mixture in the refrigerator for up to 7 days or leave it out at room temperature for up to 24 hours.

Other Important Information

- **Do not** use any tobacco products (cigarettes, pipe cigars, snuff, or chewing tobacco).
- **Do not** use alcohol.
- Limit use of Cannabidiol (CBD)/Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) as it can make dry mouth symptoms worse.
- Use a water-based lip moisturizer, such as Aquaphor or cocoa butter to protect your lips.
- Talk with your doctor if you need to use a suction canister to manage your thick saliva.
- Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any problems with pain or if you are unable to eat or drink.

More Information and Resources

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions. For more information, ask for these patient education handouts:

- **Fight Cancer-Related Fatigue with Good Nutrition** or view at: https://healthsystem.osumc.edu/pteduc/docs/fatigue-nutrit.pdf
- **Cancer Survivorship** or view at: https://healthsystem.osumc.edu/pteduc/docs/CancerSurvivorship.pdf
- **Cancer Internet Resources** or view at: https://healthsystem.osumc.edu/pteduc/docs/cancer-internet-resources.pdf
- **Patient and Family Resource Center** or view at: https://healthsystem.osumc.edu/pteduc/docs/PatientandFamilyResourceCenter.pdf
- **JamesCare for Life Programs** or view at: https://healthsystem.osumc.edu/pteduc/docs/jamescare-4life.pdf

Go to this video link: http://cancer.osu.edu/patientedvideos to learn more about your cancer diagnosis, treatment and care.