

DENTAL and ORAL COMPLICATIONS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

You or your loved one has been diagnosed with a type of blood cancer. You may experience side effects from the treatment you receive. Dental and oral complications that impact your teeth, mouth, and gums are common. How can you manage them?

This fact sheet will help you:

- Get an overview of dental and oral complications
- Understand the causes of these side effects
- Learn how to manage them and optimize your health and well-being
- Get a list of questions to ask your healthcare team



Good dental hygiene before and during treatment helps to prevent and reduce oral complications.

How severely these side effects impact you depends on the type of treatment. Side effects may improve as your treatment changes, and most go away when treatment ends.

Managing side effects is an important part of cancer treatment. Be sure to talk to your healthcare team about any side effects you may have. They can help you manage these as you go through treatment.

Dental and mouth problems

Your treatment for cancer can cause dental and oral (mouth) complications. Complications are medical problems that happen as a result of a procedure, treatment, or illness. They affect one third of people who go through cancer treatment.

Dental and oral health refer to the well-being of your entire mouth. This includes your teeth, gums, the lining of your mouth (mucosa), and the glands that produce saliva (salivary glands).

Dental and oral complications...

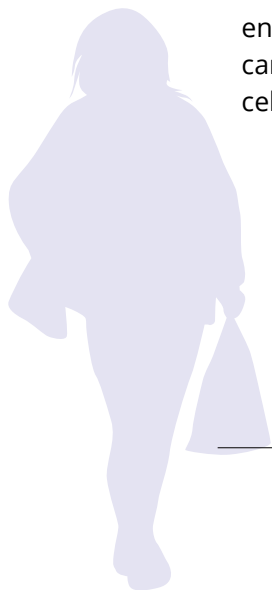
- Affect about 40% of people who receive chemotherapy, and about 80% of people who have a stem cell transplant
- Happen to nearly everyone who receives radiation for head and neck cancers
- Can make it difficult to eat, talk, chew, or swallow
- May affect your health and quality of life
- Can affect your ability to complete treatment

If the complications are severe, they can have a significant impact on your cancer treatment. Doctors may need to decrease your dose. Your treatment schedule may be changed, delayed or stopped. Talk to your healthcare team to find out the cause of oral problems so they can be prevented and treated.

How treatment affects your teeth, mouth, and gums

Before you start treatment, it helps to understand the causes, and how to treat the symptoms to improve your quality of life. How severe side effects are depends on the type of treatment and the person. This table outlines possible complications and causes.

Type of treatment	Cause	Complications (side effects)
Chemotherapy (uses medicine to kill cancer cells)	Chemotherapy treatment may: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harm normal, healthy, fast-growing cells in the mouth • Prevent the growth of normal cells in the lining of the mouth • Cause a decrease in the number of white blood cells, making it harder to fight infections • Disturb the healthy balance between good and bad bacteria in the mouth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain • Changes in taste • Tooth decay and gum disease • Mouth sores • Bleeding • Dry mouth • Infection • Difficulty swallowing • Neurotoxicity – a constant aching and burning pain similar to a toothache • Malnutrition or dehydration • Changes in dental growth and development in children
Radiation to the head and neck (uses x-rays or other high-energy rays that can kill cancer cells)	Radiation treatment may: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Damage oral tissue, salivary glands, and bones • Cause scarring or atrophy (wasting away) • Be short term or cause permanent damage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain • Changes in taste • Malnutrition or dehydration • Tooth decay and gum disease • Breakdown of tissue, bone, or muscle – may be difficult to open your mouth • Mouth sores • Infection • Dry mouth • Difficulty swallowing • Changes in dental growth and development in children



Type of treatment	Cause	Complications (side effects)
<p>Stem cell transplant (transfers a healthy person's stem cells to your body to slow the growth of the disease)</p>	<p>High doses of chemotherapy before a stem cell transplant may cause dental and oral side effects.</p> <p>People who have an allogeneic stem cell transplant have a higher risk of graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), when the donor cells attack your cells.</p>	<p>GVHD oral symptoms include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in taste • Pain – from spices, alcohol, and other flavours • Mouth sores • Dry mouth • Difficulty swallowing • Tightness in the skin and lining of the mouth
<p>Bone-modifying drugs (a class of drugs known as bisphosphonates prevents bone loss)</p>	<p>These drugs carry a risk to dental health and may cause a rare but serious side effect known as osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ).</p>	<p>ONJ causes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of the jawbone to break down • Pain • Open sores • Higher risk of tooth loss and infection

Many of the complications are short term and often stop when your treatment ends. With radiation, normal tissue cells will eventually repair themselves. Plan to schedule a dental check-up to take care of any dental problems before starting bisphosphonate treatment.

Financial considerations

Paying for dental care can be a concern for many people with cancer. Find out about your medical and dental insurance coverage and limitations before you start cancer treatments.

Share your concerns with your dental and healthcare team to see if any financial support is available.

Managing dental and oral complications

Learning about proper dental care helps you manage these side effects better. Good oral health, both before and during cancer treatment, may help prevent or reduce side effects. The goal is to treat existing dental problems before treatment begins.

What to do before treatment

If your treatment is not urgent, visit a dentist at least 4 weeks before treatment starts. The dentist can identify and address any cavities, fractured teeth, gum disease, or loose crowns or fillings. Bacteria and gum disease should be treated to reduce the risk of an infection spreading.

During the evaluation, talk to your dentist about:

- Possible oral complications from cancer treatment
- Ways to improve your oral health during cancer treatment
- Steps to maintain good nutrition and oral hygiene
- Ways to prevent infection
- Concerns about your oral health
- Your medications and treatments to avoid side effects



Tips during treatment

Keep your mouth, teeth, and gums clean to prevent cavities, mouth sores, and infections during treatment. Here are some important tips:


Oral health

- Brush your teeth and gums 2 to 3 times a day
- Use a fluoride toothpaste with a mild taste, as flavours can irritate your mouth
- Floss gently once a day if your doctor says it's safe
- Rinse your mouth every 2 hours with a mixture of water, salt, and baking soda to prevent soreness
- Use an antibacterial mouthwash 2 to 4 times a day to prevent gum disease
- Use a lip-care product to prevent your lips from drying and cracking
- If you wear dentures, keep them moist when you're not wearing them; brush them every day and clean them with a denture cleaner that your dentist recommends
- Talk to your dentist about fluoride treatments to prevent cavities and tooth sensitivity

Nutrition

- Choose healthy foods that are mild, soft, and easy to chew and swallow
- Avoid hot, spicy, acidic, and crunchy foods that may irritate your mouth
- Avoid sugary foods that cause cavities, including candy and soda (pop)
- Drink lots of water and suck on ice chips or chew sugarless gum to keep your mouth moist
- Choose a saliva substitute (an artificial form of saliva) if your mouth is dry

Lifestyle

- Avoid alcohol and tobacco products
 - Improve bone health: talk to your healthcare team about taking vitamin D and calcium supplements
 - Look in your mouth every day and take note of any sores and changes
- 



Medication and supportive care

Your healthcare team may suggest:

- **Mouth rinses** to treat mouth sores
- **Pain medications** including narcotics to relieve pain
- **Antibiotics** to treat infections
- **Other prescription medications** like oral gels to increase saliva and prevent or decrease mouth sores and tooth decay

Call your healthcare team or dentist if you notice any dental or oral complications. They can work together to manage your symptoms and treat any complications.



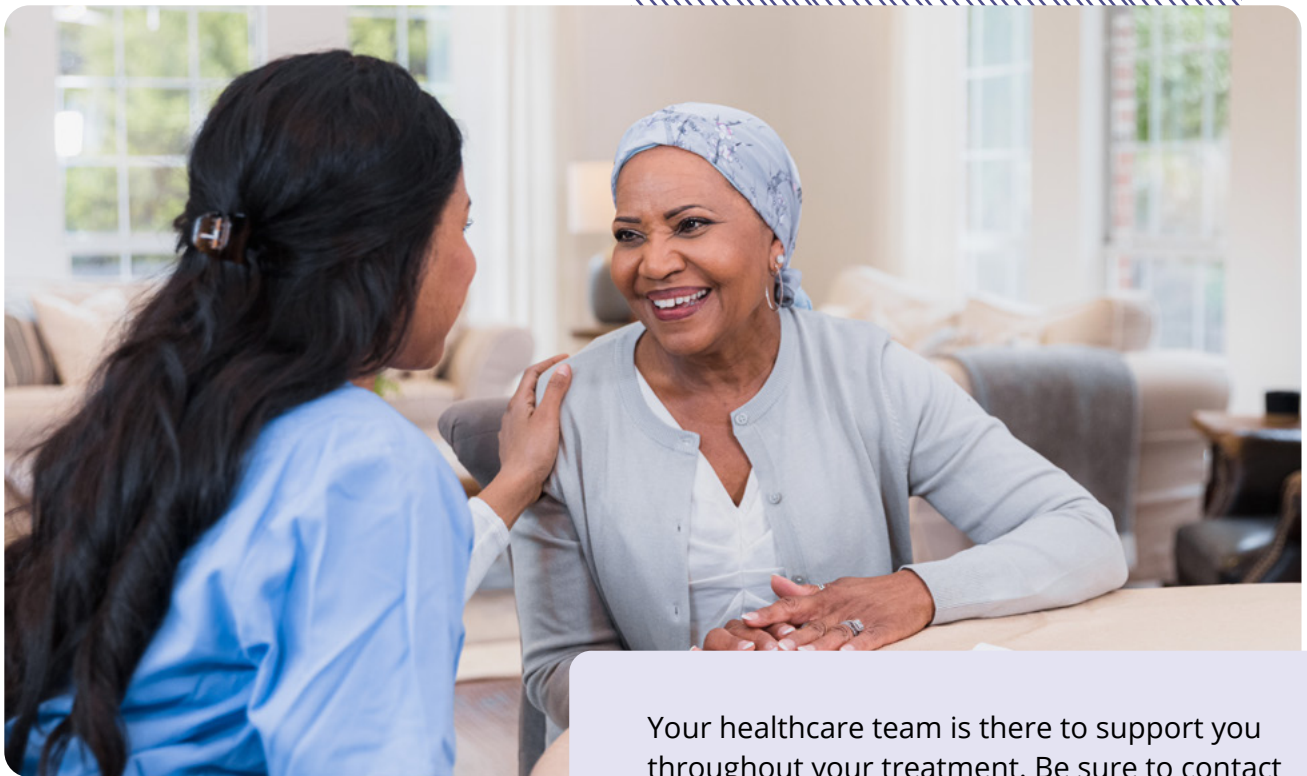
Track your side effects with the LLS Health Manager App

bloodcancers.ca/health-manager-app

Managing your side effects is an important part of cancer care. Tracking your medication, side effects, and food and nutrition intake allows you to share the information easily with your doctor to identify patterns and strategies.

Questions to ask your healthcare team

- Is my treatment likely to cause dental and oral complications?
- What can I do to prevent or manage these side effects?
- Can you recommend anything specific to eat or drink to help?
- Can you give me any medication or supplements to help?
- Can you refer me to supportive care for help managing side effects?



Your healthcare team is there to support you throughout your treatment. Be sure to contact them if you have side effects so they can be managed quickly.

This fact sheet was reviewed by
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Never hesitate to contact us, we're here to help!

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