

Nutrition and Dental Hygiene During and After Head and Neck Cancer Treatment



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A healthy mouth is a window to a healthy body where the teeth play a far more important role than we can imagine. Teeth are the organs that allow you to chew and digest food, helps to articulate, and give your face its shape and smile. However, in people with head and neck cancer, dental health may be compromised, thereby affecting the nutritional intake.

Why is nutrition and dental health a challenge?

Nutrition and dental health can be adversely affected due to:

- Cancer itself, especially of the oral cavity
- Side effects of cancer treatment (radiotherapy and chemotherapy)
- Consequence of cancer treatment, if you are receiving radiotherapy to the head and neck area, or chemotherapy

What dental complications can happen due to head and neck cancer and its cancer treatment?

Common dental problems that you may experience during and after cancer treatment include:

- Severe bone infection
- Inflammation or pain in the lining of the mouth and tongue
- Dry mouth (xerostomia)
- Loss of bone and tissue at the treatment site
- Tooth decay and gum disease
- Change or loss in taste
- Throbbing tooth pain
- Thickened saliva



These dental complications can severely affect eating and drinking in patients. Therefore, it is important to take good dental care and adopt appropriate nutritional measures.

Dental Hygiene Tips

The general dental care tips and oral hygiene you can follow are:

1. Routine Mouth Care

Brushing

- Use a soft-bristled toothbrush.
- Use a mildly flavored fluoride toothpaste to brush your teeth, gums, and tongue 2 times daily to avoid the risk of infection.
- Soak your toothbrush in warm water to make it softer.



Flossing

- Use a non-waxy floss or a clean interdental brush between your teeth.
- Be gentle, do not harm your gums.

Rinsing mouth

- Rinse your mouth every 2 hours with a mouth rinse mixture. Follow a plain water rinse.



Preparing Mouth Rinse at Home



1. Take 1 teaspoon of baking soda.
2. Take 1 teaspoon of salt.
3. Mix the above two in 1 litre of warm water.
4. Mix well and use it for rinsing your mouth.

- For relieving gum inflammation and have a plaque-free mouth you can use an antibacterial rinse (e.g., chlorhexidine gluconate) as directed by your dentist
- For mucositis, use hydrogen peroxide (3%) mixed with an equal amount of warm or saltwater, a lubricating gel, and zinc supplements daily to keep the condition from worsening.
- Use alcohol-free povidone-iodine solution only if the symptoms of mucositis are caused by radiation therapy.
- After brushing and flossing, or as instructed, use a fluoride gel or rinse to minimize the risk of tooth decay.



Diet and Nutrition Tips

Maintaining a good nutritional status may become a challenge for head and neck cancer patients, as eating normal food becomes difficult, due to the following reasons:

- Difficulty in chewing or swallowing
- Lack of appetite
- Dry mouth and oral pain
- Change or loss of taste
- Fatigue

Patients can consume a normal diet, soft diet or a liquid diet based on their health condition.



General nutritional tips



Eat small meals often, avoid large and heavy meals.



Eat foods high in calories and proteins.



Avoid using toothpicks as far as you can.



Do not use tobacco products and alcoholic drinks.



Suck ice chips if you have dry mouth.



Chew sugar-free gums or sugarless candies to stimulate saliva production.



Stay away from the food items that are sharp, crunchy, hot, spicy, and high in sugar to prevent irritating your mouth or increasing your cavities.



Drink sips of cold water/milk and other fluids that do not contain caffeine or sugar, to soothe a sore mouth.



Nutrition and dental care are inter-related and are important aspects of head and neck cancer treatment for a patient's overall health and life quality. Work with your cancer care team, including the dietician and dentist to know about what side effects to expect, how long they will last, when to notify when troublesome symptoms appear, and the precautions you may have to take as you continue to become healthy and strong once again.

Reference

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To know the details of dental care that you must take, and complete advice on maintaining good nutrition, talk to your health care team.



To know more about the head and neck cancer, visit www.headandneckcancer.co.in. Here, you may learn more about:



Diagnosis



Treatment



Managing the side effects



Post Treatment Care



Managing the finance



Expert's Talk

For further information, write to:
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