

Side effects of cancer treatment - eating and mouth problems



- Try alternatives to meat such as lentils, legumes, nuts, eggs, or cheese.
- If food is too salty, avoid adding salt to cooking and avoid takeaway food.
- If food tastes too sweet, try foods with less sugar such as porridge or Weetbix.
- Try refreshing, moist foods such as melons and berries.
- If you experience a metallic taste try using plastic or non-metal utensils.

Reducing smells

Here are some ways to help reduce off-putting food smells:

- choose plainer foods with less smell
- ask for help with meal preparation, or try pre-prepared or easy meal options
- use an extractor fan, cover pots when cooking, open doors or windows or cook outdoors such as on a BBQ
- serve food at room temperature rather than hot or cold foods.

Cancer and its treatment can change the way your salivary glands work and affect your sense of taste, texture and smell. You may experience a dry mouth and your oral health is very important at this time.

Some food may have less taste than before and others may have a salty, bitter or metallic taste. Your mouth may be more sensitive to food and drinks that are cold, hot, spicy or fizzy. These changes can affect your enjoyment of food.

Improving taste

These ideas may help to improve the taste of your food.

- If you find food tastes bland, experiment with different foods and flavours like fresh herbs, sauces, ginger, garlic, soy sauce, gravies, spices, and relishes.
- If you have lost your taste for meat, try marinating it in soy sauce, honey, ginger, or fruit juice before cooking.

Dry mouth

Some treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiation to the head and neck, can affect the salivary glands. This can cause a lack of saliva, or sometimes a thick saliva or mucous, making eating difficult. A dry mouth can occur due to dehydration. A dry mouth and lack of saliva significantly increases your risk of tooth decay and infections in the mouth and throat. Here are some things that can help:

- moisten food with gravy, sauces, custard, cream, milk, butter or oil, or dressings
- use tender moist foods such as soups, casseroles, minced or pureed meals
- sip fluids over the day such as water, weak or fruit tea, milk, or supplements (if needed)



- suck ice chips and chew sugar free chewing gum
- dip biscuits in hot drinks to soften them
- avoid coffee, alcohol, smoking, dry, salty, spicy and very hot or cold foods
- use artificial saliva, gels or an oil mouth spray (do not use before your radiation treatment)
- apply lip balm to prevent lips drying or cracking

Oral health

Before you start treatment you should have a dental check-up to make sure there is no mouth infection that can complicate cancer treatment. Treatment to your mouth and throat, a lack of saliva (dry mouth), and the use of extra snacks or drinks can affect your oral health. Take extra care of your teeth to reduce risks of infection and dental problems by following these steps below.

- Use a soft toothbrush to clean your teeth, tongue and gums each day.
- Avoid alcohol, smoking and over-the-counter mouthwashes which can dry and irritate your mouth.
- Make sure dentures are cleaned and sterilised regularly to avoid infection.
- Regularly use a mouth wash.
- Avoid sugary snacks, soft drinks and acidic fruit juices.

Mouth or swallowing problems

Mouth sores, ulcers (mucositis), infections, and swallowing difficulties (dysphagia) can occur due to treatment for your cancer. Poor teeth or ill-fitting dentures can also cause pain, making chewing and swallowing difficulties worse.

If you need to adjust the texture of your food try soft, pureed or minced food. If you are having ongoing issues with mouth or swallowing you may need a referral to a dietitian or speech language therapist.

Pain and discomfort with swallowing

Tenderness in the mouth and throat can make it difficult to eat, but the following suggestions may help.

- Use pain relief as prescribed.
- Soft, moist, minced and pureed food can be easier to eat.
- Eat small, regular meals and snacks over the day.
- Use a mouthwash regularly.

Mouthwash recipe

Add 1 tsp salt and 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) to 1 Litre of water. Mix well until dissolved. Store in the fridge and discard after 24 hours. Use as a mouthwash and rinse mouth as required. Spit out - do not swallow

- Use often during the day, after food, and before going to sleep at night.
- The mix is a good cleanser. It helps healing, helps to break down thick saliva and reduces tooth decay.

- Keep your mouth moist by sipping fluids over the day.
- Drinking through a straw can help avoid sore areas.
- Try drinks such as milk, milkshakes and supplement drinks to get extra calories and protein in.
- Avoid alcohol and smoking.
- Avoid spicy, very hot or cold, salty, and acidic food such as kiwifruit, citrus fruit and tomatoes

Further information

Tenderness in the mouth and throat can make it difficult to eat, but the following suggestions may help.

- Taste and Smell Changes fact sheet <https://www.cancervic.org.au/living-with-cancer/common-side-effects/taste-and-smell-changes>
- Cancer Council Australia: www.cancervic.org.au/living-with-cancer/nutrition/nutrition-overview
- Katzin, Carolyn. (2011) The Cancer Nutrition Centre Handbook—An Essential Guide for Cancer Patients and Their Families. Los Angeles: CFK.
- Van Mil, José; MacKenzie-Archer C. (2009) Healthy Eating During Chemotherapy. USA: Kyle Books.
- Canterbury Health. Smooth Pureed Diet: www.healthinfo.org.nz/patientinfo/Smooth%20Pureed%20Diet.pdf
- [National Health Service UK. Making the most of your pureed meals \(For Head and Neck Cancer Patients\) \(2017\)](https://www.nhs.uk/healthcareprofessionals/clinicalguidance/making-the-most-of-your-pureed-meals-for-head-and-neck-cancer-patients-2017/)
- [Morgan-Jones, P, MacLeod, R, Ellis, P, Lynch, J: Lobster for Jasino \(fabulous food for final days of life\), 2018, HammondCare Media:](https://www.hammondcaremedia.com/2018/08/lobster-for-jasino-fabulous-food-for-final-days-of-life/)
- [Howells, S. Beyond the Blender. Dysphagia Made Easy](https://www.hammondcaremedia.com/2018/08/howells-s-beyond-the-blender-dysphagia-made-easy/)