

# How to look after your mouth

Cancer Services

Produced: Sep 2023

Information for patients

Review: Sep 2026

Leaflet number: 708 Version: 7

## Is my mouth at risk?

There are many things that can affect your mouth. If you answer yes to any of the following, you may be at risk of developing problems with your mouth.

Are you:

- Having chemotherapy?
- Taking morphine (for example, MST, Oramorph, Sevredol)?
- Using oxygen?
- Using a nebuliser or inhalers?
- Feeling or being sick?
- Eating and drinking less because you have lost your appetite?
- Feeling very tired?
- Suffering with a dry mouth?

The following information will help you to look after your mouth and reduce your risk of problems.

If you are having radiotherapy to your head or neck, there is a separate mouth care leaflet available. Please ask your doctor or radiographer for this.

## How do I look after my mouth?

It is important to check your mouth for any signs of ulcers, soreness or infection. This should be done daily if you are having chemotherapy. If you are receiving your chemotherapy every three or four weeks, we recommend that you buy a new toothbrush after each cycle of treatment.

It is important to drink at least two litres (10 cups) per day to keep your mouth moist.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit [www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk) for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals  
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact [InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)

## How do I look after my mouth?

### If you have your own teeth:

- Brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste at least twice a day, but ideally after every meal and before going to bed.
- Rinse your mouth with a mouthwash after cleaning your teeth, using either:
  - \* **1 teaspoon of salt in a pint of cooled boiled water (this could be kept in a sealed container and used over 24 hours) or**
  - \* **the mouthwashes prescribed by the hospital**
- Brush gums and tongue with the toothbrush if they are dry or coated.
- Apply an appropriate lip balm to your lips to prevent drying.

### \*\*\*If you have your own teeth:

- You **should not** receive any invasive dental treatment until it has been discussed with your hospital doctor or nurse

### If you have dentures:

- Remove your dentures and clean them with a toothbrush and denture toothpaste at least twice daily, but ideally after every meal and before going to bed.
- Try to soak your dentures overnight.
- With dentures removed, rinse your mouth with either:
  - \* **1 teaspoon of salt in a pint of cooled boiled water (this could be kept in a sealed container and used over 24 hours) or**
  - \* **the mouthwashes prescribed by the hospital**
- Use a soft toothbrush to clean and stimulate the gums and tongue.
- Inspect your mouth before putting your dentures back in.
- Apply an appropriate lip balm to your lips to prevent drying.

## Important:

### You should inform your doctor or nurse if you develop any of the following:

- Ulcers in your mouth or on your lips.
- A thick coating on your tongue which cannot be removed with gentle brushing.
- Pain or soreness anywhere in the mouth.
- White patches on the inside of your cheeks or on your tongue.

If you are having chemotherapy, you should inform your hospital doctor / nurse as soon as any of these happen. If your white cell count is low, an infection in your mouth can make you very ill.

## Advice to help with common problems

The following sections give you some simple tips which you can follow if you suffer from any of the four most common problems of the mouth:

### Sore mouth

- Clean your mouth as advised above.
- If your dentures are causing the soreness, try to leave them out of your mouth as much as possible and arrange to see a dentist to have them adjusted or replaced.
- Drink and eat cold things rather than hot.
- Avoid spicy / salty foods especially if you have open sores.
- Chilled fruit, fruit jellies, ice lollipops or chilled or frozen pieces of pineapple may help.
- Try fruit juices, such as fresh orange or lemon juice - if they sting, dilute with water, tonic or soda water.
- Suck iced water or crushed ice (avoid if your white cell count is low).
- Drink sparkling water, tonic or soda water (can be frozen at home).
- Try drinking through a straw.

**Remember: Always tell your doctor or nurse if your mouth is sore or painful**

### Halitosis (bad breath)

- Clean your mouth as advised above.
- Ensure you drink at least two litres of fluid per day.
- Some foods can cause bad breath, for example garlic and spices.
- Infection of the teeth, gums or inside of the mouth can cause bad breath - you may need to visit your dentist for a check-up.
- Acid reflux or vomiting (being sick) can cause bad breath. Rinse your mouth thoroughly after being sick. You can get treatment for both acid reflux and vomiting.
- Suck flavoured sweets such as mints.

### Altered taste

- Clean your mouth as advised above.
- Ensure you drink at least two litres of fluid per day.
- Sucking pineapple chunks can help.
- Your tastes may change with time, so try foods again that may not have suited your taste at first.
- Try using stronger flavourings, such as herbs, spices, lemon juice and garlic.
- Drinks such as orange juice, bitter lemon, lemonade or herbal teas may be more refreshing than tea or coffee.
- Cold foods often taste better than piping hot foods.

**Dry mouth**

- Clean your mouth as advised above.
- Ensure you drink at least two litres of fluid per day - water or fruit juices are best. Tea and coffee can make your mouth dry.
- Avoid alcohol, except for an occasional drink
- Try soft foods and add extra gravy, butter, sauces and custards to make foods moist.
- Suck iced water or crushed ice (avoid if white cell count is low).
- Drink sparkling water, tonic or soda water (can be frozen at home).
- Chilled jellies can be refreshing.
- Pineapple chunks contain an enzyme which cleans the mouth. Tinned pineapple is less sharp than fresh. Frozen chunks are refreshing.
- Simple mouth sprays can be made from a small (new) handheld perfume atomiser spray filled with water or iced fruit juice.
- Try chewing sugar-free gum or sucking sugar-free boiled sweets.

A dry mouth can increase your risk of tooth decay. You should visit your dentist regularly. Always tell your dentist if you are having chemotherapy or radiotherapy or are taking any tablets or medicines.

**Contact numbers**

If you have any concerns or questions about looking after your mouth, please telephone us on the most appropriate number from below:

<b>24-hour Emergency Helpline</b> (7 days per week)	0808 178 2212
<b>Chemotherapy Suite</b> (Monday to Friday 9:00am to 4:30pm)	0116 258 6107
<b>Osborne Treatment Centre</b> (Monday to Friday 9:00am to 5:00pm)	0116 258 5263

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان میں درکار ہیں، تو براہ کرم مندرجہ ذیل نمبر پر ٹیلی فون کریں۔  
على هذه المعلومات بلغة أخرى، الرجاء الاتصال على رقم الهاتف الذي يظهر في الأسفل  
જો તમને અન્ય ભાષામાં આ માહિતી જોઈતી હોય, તો નીચે આપેલ નંબર પર કૃપા કરી ટેલિફોન કરો

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਹੇਠਾਂ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਗਏ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ।

Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku, proszę zadzwonić pod podany niżej numer telefonu

If you would like this information in another language or format such as EasyRead or Braille, please telephone 0116 250 2959 or email [equality@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:equality@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)