

## 12. Sore or Dry Mouth

A sore or dry mouth can be a symptom of the cancer or its treatment (e.g. chemotherapy or radiotherapy to the head or neck). It may also be related to problems with diet and eating. Both chemotherapy and radiotherapy can make it more difficult to fight off bacterial, viral and fungal infections within the mouth. If the soreness is caused by radiotherapy treatment, the symptoms tend to be worse towards the end of the treatment and can last for up to 6 weeks after treatment has finished. Soreness might also be caused by ulcers in the mouth. Mouth sores are extremely painful and unpleasant, and can become easily infected due to the large number of germs that are present in the mouth. Chemotherapy can make such infections difficult to treat; prevention is therefore important.

### How can I manage my sore or dry mouth?

- If in doubt, ask your hospital doctor, GP, nurse or radiographer to examine your mouth for signs of infections that can be remedied with suitable medication. Bacteria, viruses and fungi can all lead to a sore mouth.
- General advice for soothing a sore or dry mouth is to drink plenty of fluids, avoid acidic, salty or spicy food which might make symptoms worse, keep food moist with sauces and gravies, avoid rough textured food and try eating cold food. Also drinking through a straw might be easier.
- If dentures are worn then leaving them out as long as possible might be beneficial. However, if you are having radiotherapy to the jaw, you may be requested to leave your dentures in as long as possible.
- For a dry mouth chewing gum can stimulate saliva. Lip balm or Vaseline might be helpful for dry lips though should not be used during radiotherapy. If you are having radiotherapy, seek advice from the radiographers treating you.
- If a dry mouth is causing immediate discomfort, sucking on ice chips, popsicles, sugarless hard candy or chewing sugar free gum can relieve symptoms.
- Dry foods should be moistened with gravy, butter or other sauces to reduce dryness in the mouth and to prevent any further tissue damage in the mouth.
- It is recommended that you make regular trips to the dentist in order to prevent mouth problems. During chemotherapy, gums can become very sensitive and care should be taken to brush teeth and gums after every meal using a soft toothbrush (e.g. a child's toothbrush) to avoid mouth tissue damage. It is also advised that rinsing the mouth out with warm salt water can reduce any minor mouth sores. A dentist can also advise the best ways to brush and floss your teeth during chemotherapy.
- Mouthwashes containing sodium bicarbonate are non-irritating or a mild medicated mouthwash, free of alcohol can also be beneficial.
- Anaesthetic lozenges and sprays can numb the throat and mouth for a short period of time, if sores are causing discomfort when eating.
- Prescription of antiseptic or soothing mouth sprays may be helpful.
- Another item in this directory, eating and appetite, may have helpful information.

(Also see *Eating and Appetite* elsewhere in this Directory)

## Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<b>Dry Mouth Clinic</b> Patients who are or who have received radiotherapy to the head and neck area and are experiencing symptoms of dry mouth may wish to attend the above clinic. Appointments made through the head and neck team	<b>Restorative Dentistry</b> Level 7, Derriford Hospital Clinic is run fortnightly
<b>Mustard Tree Cancer Support &amp; Triangle Drop In Centres</b> Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers	<b>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital:</b> Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 <b>Kingsbridge:</b> Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 <b>Liskeard:</b> Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 <b>Tavistock:</b> Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935
<b>Wiltshire Farm Foods</b> Large selection of frozen meals can be ordered (online or telephone) and delivered straight to your front door	<b>Wiltshire Farm Foods</b> <b>Website:</b> www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) <b>Tel:</b> 0800 0663366
<b>Oakhouse Foods</b> Meals and groceries that can be ordered online or over the telephone and delivered directly to your door	<b>Oakhouse Foods</b> <b>Website:</b> www.oakhousefoods.co.uk <b>Tel:</b> 0333 3702514
<b>Other Resources</b>	Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse, Speech and language therapist, District Nurse, Dentist or Dietician.

## National Resources:

Resource	Contact details
<b>Macmillan Cancer Support</b> Provides information on eating with a sore mouth	<a href="http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Livingwithandaftercancer/Eatingwell/Eatingproblems/Drymouth.aspx">http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Livingwithandaftercancer/Eatingwell/Eatingproblems/Drymouth.aspx</a>
<b>The Royal Marsden Hospital website</b> Provides information on eating with a sore mouth	<a href="https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/files_trust/eating-well.pdf">https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/files_trust/eating-well.pdf</a>
<b>Macmillan Cancer Support</b> Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.	www.macmillan.org.uk <b>0808 808 0000</b> (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)

## Further information:

<b>Macmillan Cancer Support booklets:</b> – available free from the Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre	<b>Marie Curie Leaflets:</b> available free from www.mariecurie.org.uk
Side effects of cancer	Keeping your mouth healthy
Recipes for people affected by cancer	Mouth Care
Healthy Eating and Cancer	
Understanding chemotherapy	
Understanding radiotherapy	