

# Radiation Therapy to the Head & Neck: Side Effects Overview

## Sore / Dry mouth and Throat (Mucositis)

Please let your team know if you're experiencing pain, difficulty swallowing, mouth ulcers or difficulty talking.

**You may also be seen by a Dentist and Speech Language Therapist before and during your treatment.**

### Routine mouth care:

#### 1. Routine teeth / denture cleaning:

After every meal use a soft toothbrush and a non-abrasive fluoride toothpaste. The dental team can advise you on the use of fluoride based products.

#### 2. Rinse your mouth/dentures after you eat/brush teeth:

**Salt/baking soda mouth wash**— to help rinse away thick/sticky saliva and to lower mouth acidity:

1/2 teaspoon salt + 1/2 teaspoon baking soda dissolved in a glass of cooled boiled water. Gargle then rinse.



#### 3. Difflam analgesia mouthwash

Use **10ml** and rinse before eating to reduce pain and discomfort.

Gargle for 30 seconds to 1 minute every hour as required.

Remove your dentures when rinsing your mouth.

### Thick saliva

You may experience changes to your saliva during treatment e.g. thicker, stringy, sticky.

- Sip water often.
- Refer to the mouthwash advice.
- A humidifier can be helpful to moisten your throat and mouth – discuss this with a nurse/Oncologist.

## Eating changes and weight loss

- You will be supported by a dietitian throughout your treatment to assist maintaining your nutrition.
- Your taste may be altered temporarily. Food may become bland, unpleasant or you may have no taste at all.
- Try eating smaller meals more regularly rather than 3 large main meals.

### Tips to help with mouth problems

<b>Keep your mouth clean</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start mouth care at the beginning of your treatment.</li> <li>• Clean your mouth and teeth regularly (see previous page).</li> </ul>
<b>Protect your mouth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cut down or stop smoking.</li> <li>• Keep your mouth and lips moist using lip balm, sucking on ice chips or sipping water.</li> <li>• If your mouth is dry, try using artificial saliva, sugarless lollies, and oral moisturisers.</li> </ul>
<b>Check your mouth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a mirror and bright light to look inside your mouth every day for sores, red or white areas, or bleeding.</li> </ul>
<b>Look after your teeth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You will be seeing a Dentist before and during your treatment</li> </ul>
<b>Managing pain</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take your pain medicine as prescribed, particularly before meals.</li> </ul>
<b>Eating and drinking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose foods that are soft, moist, and easy to swallow, such as rice, mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs, and yoghurt.</li> <li>• Use gravies and sauces to moisten foods.</li> <li>• Don't eat crunchy, acidic or spicy foods.</li> <li>• Don't drink alcohol or sour juice.</li> <li>• Avoid food and drink that is very hot or cold.</li> </ul>

eviQ, ID: 3099 v.4 - adapted form

#### References

SCoR—The Society and College of Radiographers, 2021. <https://www.sor.org/news/scor-updates-radiation-dermatitis-guidelines>

#### Illustrated panels from the above reference

eviQ— Patient and carers, patient information sheets, managing side effects, ID: 3099 v.4, last reviewed 11 July 2019, eviQ Cancer treatments Online, Cancer Institute NSW, <https://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers/patient-information-sheets/managing-side-effects/3099-mouth-problems-during-cancer-treatment>

Radiation therapy can cause side effects in your treatment area which can vary from patient to patient. The Radiation Oncologist will have discussed the possible short and long term side effects with you during the consent process.

This brochure explains the short term side effects. These symptoms can begin during a course of radiation therapy and may even peak 1-2 weeks after a treatment course is complete. They should have settled around 6 weeks after treatment.

The oncology nurses will see you on day one or two of your treatment to discuss any concerns or questions you have. Further assessments can be arranged at this time.

### Contacts

Regional Blood and Cancer Service  
Building 8, Level 4, Auckland City Hospital  
Auckland DHB

Phone: 09 307 4949

Reception ext 22631

Nurses ext 22837

Acute Oncology ext 23826 (Mon-Fri 8-4pm)

Haere Mai Welcome | Manaaki Respect  
Tūhono Together | Angamua Aim High

## Most Common Side Effects

- Fatigue
- Skin reactions
- Sore mouth and throat
- Dry mouth and throat
- Thick saliva
- Loss of taste/appetite
- Weight loss
- Pain and swelling - Some swelling can occur in the treatment area which can cause discomfort or pain. Take paracetamol as required. Discuss with your treatment team if the pain continues while taking paracetamol
- Hair loss – only in the treatment area – often not permanent
- Nausea – more common if you're having chemotherapy as well. Speak to your team for advice.

If you're also having chemotherapy and are experiencing side effects from this treatment please let your team know.

## We're here to help!

Every day a radiation therapist will ask how you are. Please do not hesitate to voice any concerns. If you're experiencing any of these side effects (not limited to this list), we can refer you to our oncology nurses to discuss further.

You may be supported by a Dentist, Dietician, Speech Language Therapist, Nurse Specialist and Oncologist throughout treatment.

## Fatigue

There are many contributing factors that will cause tiredness.

- The effect of treatment on normal cells
- Stress related to your illness
- Daily travel to treatment
- Balancing life outside your treatment.

## Suggestions:

- Ensure you're eating a balanced diet (additional supplements are **not** recommended, unless prescribed by your oncology team)
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Rest and gentle exercise (walking)
- Practice self care (personal techniques that help you relax)
- Accept help from others.

## Skin Reactions

The skin over your face and neck will experience a skin reaction. It will not happen straight away but tends to develop gradually throughout treatment and usually starts to settle 2-4 weeks after treatment finishes.



gradually become  
pinker or darker



feel dry or  
tight, and sore



develop a rash  
and feel itchy



blister or peel

## Skin care advice

Reactions to your skin can't be prevented however there are things you can do to help yourself feel more comfortable.

Tell your radiation therapist or nurse about your skin care routine. They will let you know if you should make any changes to your routine to help you feel more comfortable.



## you may

go swimming if your skin is **NOT**  
blistered or peeling

Rinse off the chlorine or salt immediately  
after and apply moisturiser.



## you may

find it more comfortable to wear  
loose-fitting clothing



## please avoid

sun exposure and protect the  
area from direct sunlight

Do not use sunscreen during treatment

## Hygiene and moisturising

- Our nurses will give you a moisturiser to use during treatment. If you have a preferred one please bring it in to show our nurses.
- Use the moisturiser a few times daily. Do not apply immediately before your treatment.
- Please stop using it if your skin becomes irritated, blisters or peels.



## washing and bathing

Make sure the water is not too hot; wash the  
skin gently with products you would normally  
use and gently pat dry



## deodorants/sprays

Please continue to use the deodorant you  
normally use, unless it irritates your skin; stop if  
your skin blisters or peels

## 'DON'Ts' for the treatment area

Please avoid...



rubbing  
the area



using sticky tape



shaving



using wax,  
cream or lasers



using  
make-up