

Radiation Therapy to the Head and Neck

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You are scheduled to receive radiation treatments designed specifically for you. The following guidelines will help you take an active part in your radiation therapy.

What to Expect During Treatment

Temporary Skin Changes

Temporary skin changes may occur in the treated area. Usually these changes include redness, dryness, scaling, and itchiness.

These skin changes usually occur 1 to 2 weeks after treatment begins and may last 1 to 2 weeks after your last treatment.

During this time:

- Men may shave, but only with electric shavers. Do not use pre-shave or after-shave lotions.
- Women should not apply makeup to the treated area.
- Moisturizers such as: _____ may be applied to the treated area as needed. Do not use moisturizers within 2 hours before your radiation treatment.
- Wear soft, loose-fitting shirts with open collars to prevent skin irritation.

Permanent Skin Changes

Permanent skin changes include increased sensitivity to summer and winter temperatures. Apply PABA-free sunscreens routinely to the treatment site whenever you are outdoors for more than 10 minutes, summer or winter. Use a sunscreen with a minimum sun protection factor (SPF) of 30.

Mouth Care

You will need to take special care of your teeth and mouth while you are receiving radiation treatments.

- If you have your natural teeth, you need to schedule a checkup with your dentist before your radiation treatment planning begins. Special fluoride treatments are necessary. Tell your dentist to call this radiation center to speak to your doctor or nurse if you receive dental care before or during treatment.
- Use a toothbrush with soft bristles. If you have any soreness or tenderness in your mouth, using a soft sponge to clean your mouth and teeth may be helpful. Your nurse can give you the names of appropriate products to use.
- Gently floss your teeth daily with unwaxed dental floss.
- If you wear partial or full dentures, you may want to keep them in only while you are eating.
- Examine your mouth and gums every day. Tell your nurse if you notice any red or white spots or if your mouth becomes sore.
- Rinse your mouth with a mixture of 1/2 teaspoon of salt and 8 ounces of water or 1/2 teaspoon of sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) and 8 ounces of water. This should be done at least after every meal and at bedtime. Avoid mouthwash that contains alcohol, which can cause dryness in your mouth.

- After mouth care, apply a lubricant such as: _____

Mouth and Throat Dryness

Your mouth and throat will feel dry and your saliva and mucus may become thick. This usually occurs 1 to 2 weeks after the start of your radiation treatments. It may last for several months after your radiation therapy has ended.

- Eat and drink frequently to maintain moisture in your mouth. You may want to try artificial saliva. Ask your nurse to tell you about this product.
- Use a water bottle or travel cup to drink from throughout the day.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck sugarless candy lemon drops or sour balls to increase saliva production..
- Add sauces and gravy to foods to make them easier to swallow.
- Do not smoke or chew tobacco.
- Do not drink alcoholic beverages.
- Use a cool-air humidifier at home. Clean the humidifier and change the water every day.

Mouth and Throat Soreness

Your mouth and throat may become sore about 2 weeks after the start of your radiation treatments. This soreness usually lasts for 2 or 4 weeks after your treatments have ended.

The mouth and throat irritation may make it difficult to swallow and maintain your nutrition. In some cases the insertion of a feeding tube to help maintain your nutrition may be necessary.

- Use lozenges, sprays, or other medications to help numb your mouth and throat. These may be very helpful before meals and at bedtime. Please ask your nurse about these products.
- Pain medication may also be prescribed.
- Eat soft foods that are easy to chew and swallow.
- Drink nutritional supplements such as Ensure®, Boost® or Carnation Instant Breakfast® to help maintain your nutritional needs.
- Do not eat or drink very hot or very cold foods or drinks. It may be easier to eat foods that are cool or at room temperature.
- Do not eat citrus, spicy, salty, rough, or dry foods.
- A dietitian is available to help you. Tell your nurse if you would like to speak to a dietitian.
- If excessive weight is lost and you are unable to maintain oral nutrition a feeding tube may be needed.

What to Ask Your Nurse or Doctor

Ask your nurse or doctor any questions you may have about the following:

- Products to moisturize skin
- Concerns about treatments or procedures
- Suggestions about ways to keep your mouth moist
- Availability of support groups

Things to Report to Your Nurse or Doctor

Tell your nurse or doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Inability to eat your usual diet
- Sores in your mouth or on your lips
- Red, swollen, or tender areas of skin
- Any new or unusual symptoms

Things to Report Immediately

Call **immediately** if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Unusual bleeding
- Difficulty catching your breath
- Temperature of 100.5 F (38.0 C) or higher
- Chills

In an Emergency, Call:
