

# On-Treatment Education for Head and Neck Cancer Patients

## Side Effects

Side effects may gradually occur 1-3 weeks following the start of treatment and will slowly get better once treatment is finished. Inflammation and pain may still occur after the end of your treatment for several weeks. Patients can experience different side effects based on the area being treated. Fatigue is quite common during treatment but should be tolerable. Mouth changes can include sore mouth and throat, dry mouth, thick phlegm, alteration of taste, and pain with swallowing. Skin changes can resemble a bad sunburn with redness, peeling, and increased pigmentation. Possible nasal changes can include dryness, stuffiness, and/or occasional minor nosebleeds if we are treating your sinuses. Ear pain may develop due to swelling.

Please discuss concerns or any questions you have about your treatment with your doctor, nurse, or radiation therapist. You will have scheduled on-treatment visits with your radiation oncology physician and nurse at least once a week to go over any questions and manage any side effects.

## Skin Care

Bathe and shower daily using warm water and a mild unscented soap such as Dove<sup>®</sup>, Purpose<sup>®</sup>, or baby soap. **DO NOT** use a washcloth, scrubbing cloth, or brush when bathing. When drying off, pat skin dry with a soft towel or allow to air dry. **DO NOT** shave or apply pre- or after-shave lotions to or near the treatment area. **DO NOT** use makeup on the treated area.

We advise patients to start using Aquaphor<sup>®</sup>, Vaseline<sup>®</sup>, or 100% aloe vera at the beginning of treatment. Any product that is used on your treatment site should not be applied less than 4 hours before your treatment time. If your skin is itchy, **DO NOT**

scratch it and please let your radiation oncologist and nurse know. To minimize skin irritation, wear loose-fitting cotton clothing. Protect your skin from sun exposure by applying sunscreen, wearing hats, or covering the skin with clothing. Avoid tanning or burning your skin during and after your treatment. Avoid extreme temperature to the area being treated, including:

- Hot tubs
- Water bottles
- Heating pads
- Ice packs

**DO NOT** use products with alcohol, including alcohol pads, on your skin in the area being treated. Swimming is permitted only if you do not have any skin reactions during your treatment or the pool is chlorinated. Rinse off chlorine right after getting out of the pool.

### Managing Mouth and Throat Soreness

Mouth and throat irritation can make it challenging to swallow and maintain proper nutrition. We will follow your weight closely. In some cases, the insertion of a feeding tube may be necessary to help you do so. Your treatment team will recommend and/or prescribe oral mouth rinses and/or pain medication to treat mouth sores, which can be especially helpful before meals and at bedtime. Eat soft, bland foods that are easy to chew and swallow. We have on-site dietitians to help you, so please tell your nurse if you'd like to meet with them.

### Mouth and Throat Dryness

Eat and drink frequently to maintain moisture in your mouth. It can be helpful to carry water around with you throughout the day. Biotene<sup>®</sup>, an over-the-counter product, can be used to combat dry mouth in a variety of forms including toothpaste, mouthwash, lozenge, and travel spray. Another over-the-counter product, XyliMelts<sup>®</sup>, is helpful for dry mouth when you are sleeping. You can also use a cool-mist humidifier at night when you sleep. With excessive dry mouth, cavities can form so please stay hydrated.

## Mouth Care

Take extra care of your teeth and mouth while you are receiving radiation treatments. A toothbrush with soft bristles and a mild toothpaste, such as Biotene<sup>®</sup>, is preferred. If your toothpaste starts to burn your mouth, try using children's toothpaste. For any soreness or tenderness in your mouth or teeth, use a soft sponge or cloth to clean. Gently floss your teeth daily with unwaxed dental floss. For partial or full dentures, consider keeping them in only while you are eating. **DO NOT** use mouthwash that has alcohol. If prescribed by your dentist, use fluoride trays daily.

## Thick Phlegm

Thick mucus can be combated by the use of Robitussin<sup>®</sup> or Mucinex<sup>®</sup>, both over-the-counter medications. You may buy off brand products, but make sure that guaifenesin is the main ingredient. Please take these medications according to the box label. You can also use salt and baking soda rinses to help break up thick mucus.

## Salt and Baking Soda Oral Rinses

We recommend using salt and baking soda rinses to help keep your mouth clean. During radiation treatment, you are prone to a fungal infection called thrush, which can be painful. To make the salt and baking soda rinse and directions for use:

- Dissolve ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon baking soda in 32 ounces of lukewarm water
- Thoroughly swish the solution in your mouth, then spit; you may also gargle with the mixture if your throat is sore
- Rinse 6-8 times daily
- *Helpful hint:* Keep a quart of rinse in the bathroom and rinse each time you use the restroom

## Fatigue

Continue to stay active during the radiation treatment. Moderate levels of exercise, such as going for a daily walk and maintaining your nutrition is recommended.

## Avoiding Irritants

**DO NOT** smoke, chew tobacco, or drink alcohol. Citrus, spicy, salty, rough, and dry foods can increase mouth and throat pain.

## Vitamin Usage

If you are taking any vitamin supplements, please consult the medical team as several are not recommended while on therapy. These include any antioxidants, such as Vitamin B, Vitamin C, and Vitamin E.

## Contact Your Nurse or Physician Immediately For:

- Inability to eat your usual diet
- Red, swollen, or tender areas of skin
- Temperature of 100.5° F or higher
- Chills
- Call 911 if you experience uncontrolled bleeding, shortness of breath, or any life threatening emergencies

## Follow-Up Appointments

A follow-up visit with your radiation oncologist will be scheduled within 4 weeks after your last treatment but can be dependent on the physician.

## Contact Us

Call the clinic at 214-645-8525, or for non-emergent issues, please utilize MyChart allowing at least 24 hours on business days for a response. If it is emergent afterhours, you can speak to an on-call team. In the case of emergencies, please proceed to your nearest Emergency Room. If possible, please come to UT Southwestern or Parkland Emergency Department for continuity of care should you need to be admitted to the hospital.