

**Some cancer treatments can damage the cells that line the inside of the mouth and throat. Damage to the lining of the mouth and throat can cause pain, sores, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth and infections. Managing mouth and throat side effects can help you maintain your overall health and quality of life during cancer treatment.**

Mouth and throat side effects may include

- Sores in the mouth and throat
- Burning or pain in the mouth or throat, with or without sores
- Difficulty swallowing
- Dry mouth
- Changes in the way certain foods taste
- Sensitivity to hot or cold foods
- White patches or coating in the mouth, which may be signs of infection

---

Tell your healthcare team if you have pain in your mouth, lips or throat that makes it difficult for you to eat, drink, take medication or sleep. Your healthcare team can help you find ways to ease your pain and ensure that you are getting the nutrition you need.

---

## NUTRITION

Good nutrition is important during cancer treatment, but mouth and throat side effects may make it uncomfortable to eat and drink. If you are losing weight, talk to your healthcare team. Ongoing weight loss can be a sign of malnutrition. Malnutrition occurs when a person does not eat or absorb enough calories or key nutrients needed for healthy body function. Cancer patients who are malnourished are at greater risk for health complications, hospitalization, infections, loss of muscle strength and poor quality of life.

**For help managing appetite loss and improving nutrition, visit [www.LLS.org/booklets](http://www.LLS.org/booklets) to view *Side Effect Management: Managing Low Appetite and Weight Loss*.**

## MOUTH CARE TIPS TO MANAGE SYMPTOMS

Before starting cancer treatment, try to go to the dentist. Good dental health before treatment lowers the risk of mouth side effects. Tell your dentist about your upcoming cancer treatment. Your dentist can make sure that your mouth is as healthy as possible by taking care of any dental issues such as cavities or gum disease.

**Always check with your cancer treatment team before you have your teeth cleaned or any other dental work done. Dental work may not be safe during cancer treatment, or extra precautions may be needed.**

Follow these mouth-care tips:

- Clean your mouth daily. Gently brush your teeth, gums and tongue after each meal and before bed. Use toothpaste and a toothbrush with very soft bristles.
- If you are at risk of bleeding, ask your doctor if it is safe for you to floss your teeth.
- Rinse your mouth several times a day with a mixture of 1 quart of water, 1 teaspoon baking soda, and ¾ teaspoon salt.
- Do not use a mouthwash that contains alcohol. Alcohol can irritate the mouth.
- If you have braces, you may need to have them removed during treatment.
- Do not use toothpicks or other sharp objects in your mouth.
- Avoid cigarettes and other tobacco products, which can irritate the mouth. Visit [www.smokefree.gov](http://www.smokefree.gov) for help to quit.
- Tell the healthcare team if your gums are bleeding or if you have white patches in your mouth, which may be signs of infection.

**For more on dental care, visit [www.LLS.org/booklets](http://www.LLS.org/booklets) to view *Dental and Oral Complications of Cancer Treatment Facts*.**

## MEDICATION TO RELIEVE SYMPTOMS

Your doctor may be able to prescribe medications, special mouthwashes, lozenges, sprays, or artificial saliva products to help with mouth and throat symptoms. Your doctor may also prescribe pain medication to make eating less painful.

## TIPS TO MANAGE SORE MOUTH AND THROAT

- Choose soft bland foods that are easy to chew and swallow.
- Moisten foods with sauces or gravy. Dip bread, crackers or other baked goods in milk or tea.
- Cut food into small pieces.
- Avoid food that may irritate the mouth including foods that are spicy, salty, hard or crunchy and also foods that are acidic, such as lemons, limes, oranges and tomatoes.
- Avoid carbonated beverages and alcoholic beverages.
- Allow hot foods, soup and beverages to cool to room temperature before eating or drinking.

- Eat small meals throughout the day instead of three large meals. It may be easier to eat a smaller amount of food at one time.
- Suck on frozen fruit, ice or ice chips, or popsicles to soothe your mouth.
- Drink cool liquids throughout the day and with meals. Try using a straw to help avoid irritating mouth sores.
- Ask for a referral to a registered dietitian for additional help in getting the nutrition you need while dealing with mouth or throat sores.

## TIPS TO MANAGE DRY MOUTH

- Use sugar-free gum and candy, popsicles and ice chips to help keep the mouth moist.
- Use lip balm if your lips become dry.
- Choose foods that are easier to chew and swallow such as soft foods, soups and stews, and foods served with gravy or sauces.
- Drink at least 8-10 eight-ounce cups of liquid every day.
- Tart foods or drinks, such as lemonade, may help your mouth produce more saliva.

## TIPS TO MANAGE CHANGE IN TASTE

- Rinse your mouth before and after eating.
- Sugar-free gum or mints after eating may help get rid of a bad taste.
- If meats taste bitter, try using a sweet marinade, or eat other sources of protein such as eggs, cheese, nuts or beans.
- Use plastic utensils instead of metal to avoid a metallic taste.
- Sense of smell and taste are directly related to each other, so minimize strong smells by
  - Not eating where you cook
  - Using a fan to remove food aromas
  - Using a cup with a lid and straw
  - Serving food at room temperature
- Try new seasonings, marinades and foods. Sometimes, foods you did not like before treatment become more appealing as tastes change.

## TRACKING SIDE EFFECTS

Certain foods, medications or activities may trigger symptoms or make them worse. Tracking your daily health and habits in a journal or app on your phone may help you and your doctor discover ways to manage mouth and throat side effects.

With the LLS Health Manager™ mobile app, you can use your phone to track side effects, medication, food and hydration. You can set up reminders to take medications, to eat, and to drink water throughout the day. You can also share the information with your doctor to identify patterns and develop strategies to help manage mouth and throat symptoms. **Visit [www.LLS.org/HealthManager](http://www.LLS.org/HealthManager) to download.**

## Questions To Ask Your Healthcare Team

- **What are the possible side effects of my treatment?**
- **What can I do to manage these side effects?**
- **Are there medicines that can help?**
- **Are there any nutrition guidelines I should follow?**
- **Can you refer me to a registered dietitian?**
- **Can you refer me to palliative (supportive) care for help managing side effects?**
- **What signs or symptoms require a trip to the emergency room?**

## GET ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's **Information Specialists**, master's level oncology social workers and health educators, can provide information and support and connect you to our **Clinical Trial Support Center** and **Registered Dietitians**.

- Call **800.955.4572** Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. (ET)
- Visit **[www.LLS.org/PatientSupport](http://www.LLS.org/PatientSupport)**

## Acknowledgement

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS) appreciates the review of this material by:

### Holly Mills, MS, RD, CSO

Oncology Dietitian, John Theurer Cancer Center  
Hackensack University Medical Center, Hackensack, NJ

### Darci L. Zblewski, APRN, CNP

Division of Hematology, Myeloid Group  
Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN