

# Head and Neck Radiation Treatment and Your Oral Health



This booklet focuses on preventing and managing oral complications of cancer therapy.

*Developed by the Oral Health Center, College of Dental Medicine, University of New England, 1 College Street, Portland, Maine 04103*

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Most head and neck cancers are treated with radiation therapy either as neoadjuvant or adjuvant therapy modalities.

## WHAT IS RADIATION THERAPY (RADIOTHERAPY)?

Radiotherapy is an oncologic treatment that uses high doses of radiation to kill or slow down the growth of cancer cells.

## ARE YOU BEING TREATED WITH RADIATION FOR CANCER IN YOUR HEAD AND NECK?

If yes, this booklet is a good resource. While radiotherapy is an effective modality for cancer treatment, it can also cause side effects that can negatively impact your oral and general health.

These side effects are likely to delay or interrupt your cancer therapy as well as impact your speech and your ability to eat and swallow food. In addition, they may make you prone to oral and general infections.

## WHAT SIDE EFFECTS CAN ARISE FROM HEAD AND NECK RADIATION?

Even though radiation kills cancer cells, it can also harm normal cells in the mouth resulting in

- Mouth sores that look like ulcers (mucositis)
- Dry mouth (xerostomia)
- Loss of taste and changes in taste (dysgeusia)
- Tooth decay secondary to dry mouth
- Infections
- Jaw stiffness (trismus)
- Jaw bone changes (osteoradionecrosis)

## HOW LONG DO THESE SIDE EFFECTS LAST?

Some problems, like mucositis, may resolve shortly after treatment ends. Others, such as dysgeusia and trismus, may last for months or even years, while, xerostomia may last for a lifetime.



## SHOULD I SEE A DENTIST?

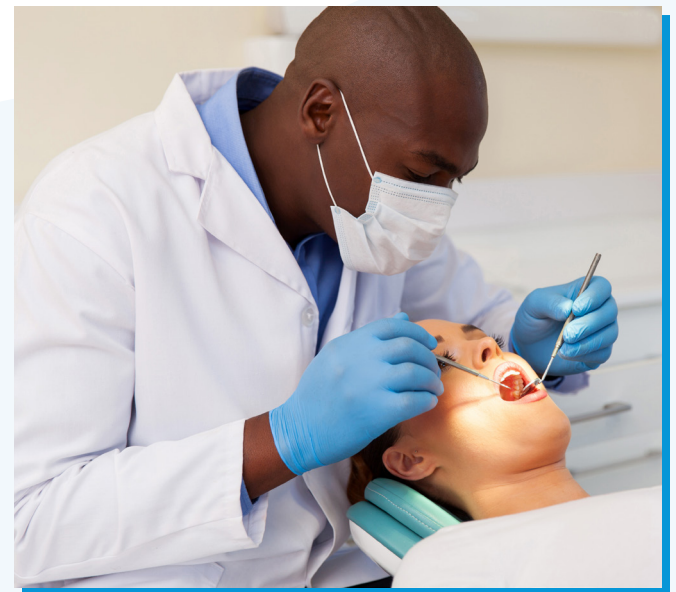
Yes, a dentist plays an important role in your head and neck cancer treatment. Visiting the dentist before your head and neck radiotherapy will likely help prevent serious mouth side effects discussed above. These side effects usually occur in patients whose mouths are not healthy before radiotherapy starts.

## WHEN SHOULD I SEE A DENTIST?

You should see the dentist several weeks before you start your radiation treatment, if possible. If you missed a dental visit before starting radiation, you should see one as soon as possible. Have your physician/radiation oncologist coordinate your oral care with the dentist and inform your dentist about your upcoming radiation treatment.

## WHAT WILL THE DENTIST DO?

- Perform a complete oral evaluation
- Clean your teeth
- Treat any tooth that requires a filling or extraction
- Provide you with oral hygiene instructions
- Prescribe fluoride toothpaste and possibly mouthwashes
- Educate you on how to care for your mouth to prevent side effects
- Show you how to prevent and treat jaw stiffness by exercising the jaw muscles



## DO I STILL NEED TO SEE A DENTIST AFTER COMPLETING MY HEAD AND NECK RADIATION?

Yes, as a patient who has received head and neck radiotherapy, you are predisposed to some side effects for a lifetime. Regular visits to the dentist, every 3 months for the first year post-radiation and subsequently every 6 months should help prevent some of these side effects.

### REMEMBER TO

- Brush your teeth, gums and tongue with a soft toothbrush after every meal and at bedtime
- If your mouth hurts, call the dentist
- Avoid crunchy foods and sugary foods
- Avoid toothpicks
- Avoid all tobacco products and alcoholic drinks



## DO CHILDREN GET MOUTH SIDE EFFECTS TOO?

Yes, depending on the age of the child, head and neck radiation therapy can also cause side effects such as: loss of teeth and abnormal development of the jaw and teeth.

Our dental professionals at the Oral Health Center, College of Dental Medicine, University of New England can provide you with comprehensive oral health care.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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