

Patient information

Looking after your Teeth following Radiotherapy to your Head and Neck

Head and Neck Department

Radiotherapy is used to treat cancer but can have harmful side-effects for your mouth, teeth and jaws.

Please read this leaflet very carefully so that you reduce the chances of developing these problems. If there is anything you do not understand, then please ask any members of your cancer team to help you.

Before you start radiotherapy treatment, your dental and oral health needs to be as good as possible to avoid problems later. Make sure you have a dental check up at the hospital or your own dental practice before you start radiotherapy. Urgent dental treatment, such as extractions should be carried out as soon as possible before radiotherapy.

What are the main problems with Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy damages your saliva glands and makes them produce less saliva.

- There are saliva glands around your face and in your mouth, which can become damaged. This damage leads to a dry mouth.
- The amount of dryness you will have depends on previous surgery you may have had, and the amount of radiotherapy treatment which is given to you.

A dry mouth increases tooth decay when you eat and drink sugary things.

Saliva is very important at protecting teeth from decay. When you have less saliva, even small amounts of sugary foods and drinks can cause very severe tooth decay, which can be difficult to treat and may result in you needing some tooth extractions.

Radiotherapy damages the jaw bones and makes them heal poorly.

Radiotherapy reduces the blood supply to the jaw bones (especially the lower jaw). This tends to be worse further back in the jaws where the molar teeth are.

If you need to have teeth removed after radiotherapy, then there is a risk (five-ten %) that the jaw bone will not heal properly. This can result in severe pain, jaw stiffness and very serious infection within your jaw. If this happens, you may need further surgery (which is often difficult), to remove the infected part of the jaw and to re-build your jaw with bone from your leg or hip.

You will be given further information about this surgery if you need it.

What can I expect during Radiotherapy?

About two weeks after the start of radiotherapy you may notice an increase in mouth ulcers and mouth soreness. Your mouth may become dry and there may be a loss of taste. These changes may make it difficult to swallow and eat.

These problems are worse between two and six weeks after starting treatment, after this they will gradually improve although many patients are left with a permanently dry mouth.

How can I look after my mouth and teeth during Radiotherapy?

- Keep your mouth moist by sipping water or by using saliva substitutes, which are available on prescription.
- Rinse your mouth with a chlorhexidine mouthwash (e.g., Corsodyl); dilute the mouthwash with water if it stings too much. This mouthwash may stain your teeth, but this can be easily removed later.
- Clean your teeth with a soft brush and fluoride toothpaste, ideally twice a day. If your mouth is too sore to brush your teeth, just wipe around your mouth with a pink sponge (you will be given a supply of these) soaked in diluted chlorhexidine mouthwash.
- If you wear dentures clean them carefully after every meal and ideally remove dentures before bedtime.

How can I look after my teeth after Radiotherapy?

- **Watch Your Diet** (Small amounts of sugar can do a lot of damage when you have a dry mouth).
- **Try to avoid sugary foods and drinks as much as possible** – especially between meals or before bedtime.
- Avoid sweets, biscuits and cakes.
- Avoid sugar in tea and coffee (use a sweetener).
- Avoid fizzy drinks such as cola and lemonade.
- If you are given build up drinks such as Ensure or Fortisip by your dietician, be aware that they are very sugary. After every drink, rinse your mouth very well with water to remove all traces, which may be stuck to your teeth. If you have a PEG feeding tube, then dilute your build up drinks with water and then take them through your PEG tube.

Always ask your dietician for advice if you are unsure about what you should be eating and drinking.

Get enough fluoride and mineral back into your teeth.

Brush your teeth after every meal using fluoride toothpaste.

If you find that your toothpaste burns your mouth, try different ones until you find one which is best.

If in doubt, ask your dentist or a member of the cancer team for help in choosing a suitable one. Ask your dentist about having high fluoride “Colgate Duraphat” toothpaste prescribed.

Use a daily fluoride mouthwash.

You can buy this from any pharmacist - ask your dentist or a pharmacist if you are unsure. Mouthwashes containing alcohol may sting.

Use fluoride gel in a special tray – If directed by your dentist.

If you are experiencing early widespread tooth decay, your dentist may make special trays which fit over your teeth to allow you to apply fluoride gel in a more concentrated way.

Ask your dentist to provide you with “Tooth-mousse” which is a paste which helps to put mineral back into your teeth. GC Tooth Mousse is also available to purchase online.

It should be used last thing at night and be wiped onto your teeth with a finger-tip and left to dissolve. Alternatively, it can be used in a special tray as for fluoride gels.

See your dentist every three to four months.

- It is extremely important that you have a dentist who you can see regularly.
- **If you do not have your own dentist or are having problems finding a dentist, let your cancer consultant know so that we can make arrangements for you.**
- Seeing a dentist regularly helps to spot any early problems which can be managed simply and help to prevent more serious problems in future.
- Should you need dental extractions after radiotherapy, your dentist should refer you back to the Head and Neck Unit for this treatment.

If you are not registered with a dentist it is very important that you do so.

How to find an NHS Dentist:

Contact Healthwatch Liverpool

Telephone: 0300 77 77 007 (Calls cost the same as to a local landline number. They will call you back to keep your bill down)

Email: enquiries@healthwatchliverpool.co.uk

Warrington:

<http://www.healthwatchwarrington.co.uk/>

Tel: 01925 246 893

Email: contact@healthwatchwarrington.co.uk

Wirral:

Tel: 0151 230 8957

Email: info@healthwatchwirral.co.uk

Southport, Formby, Sefton:

<http://www.healthwatchsefton.co.uk/>

Freephone: 0800 206 1304

Telephone: 0151 920 0726 ext 240

Text: 07434 810 438

Email: info@healthwatchsefton.co.uk

Knowsley, St Helens, Prescot and surrounding Liverpool area:

<http://www.healthwatchknowsley.co.uk>

0151 449 3954

Email: enquiries@healthwatchknowsley.co.uk

Halton, Widnes, Runcorn:

<http://www.healthwatchhalton.co.uk/>

Telephone: 0300 777 6543

Email: enquiries@healthwatchhalton.co.uk

Health in Wales

<http://www.wales.nhs.uk/ourservices/findannhsdentist>

To find a dentist in another area, access:

www.healthwatch.co.uk/find-local-healthwatch

Alternatively access **NHS Choices:**

<http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/dentists/Pages/find-an-NHS-dentist.aspx>

This is the NHS's website with information on health services for patients.

Please be aware that you will be given details of dentists that are taking new NHS patients or providing emergency dental treatment. You will have to contact the dentist personally for an appointment.

Urgent dental problem?

If you need to see an NHS dentist today, contact the urgent dental care line on Tel: 0151 300 8349.

This is a call centre where patients are triaged according to their dental need; if appropriate you will be given an appointment, usually the same day at the Liverpool Dental Access Centre.

Or call the NHS non-emergency number on 111. This is the number to call if you need to be seen urgently but it's not a 999 emergency.

The service is free to call and you will speak to a trained advisor that will help you to find the right service.

Feedback

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future.

Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

Further information

Liverpool Head and Neck Cancer Centre Website

<https://livheadandneck.co.uk>

Mouth Cancer Foundation Website

<http://www.mouthcancerfoundation.com>

Changing Faces

Helps those with facial disfigurement to face the world with confidence.

1-2 Junction Mews

London W2 1PN

Tel/Fax: 020 7706 4232

<http://www.changingfaces.org.uk>

National Association of Laryngectomy Clubs (NALC)

Promotes the welfare of laryngectomy patients and their families.

Provides information as well as practical advice and support

Ground Floor

6 Rickett Street

London

SW6 1RU

Tel: 020 7381 9993

<http://www.laryngectomees.inuk.com>

Macmillan Cancer Support

Macmillan and Cancer BACKUP have merged to provide information and support for patients, families and carers at every stage of cancer, from diagnosis to aftercare.

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/>

Tel: 0808 808 00 00

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All Trust approved information is available on request in alternative formats, including other languages, easy read, large print, audio, Braille, moon and electronically.

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