

Dry mouth

[Radiotherapy](#) to the head and neck area, and some cancer drugs, can damage the saliva glands. This may mean they produce less saliva (spit) and give you a dry mouth (xerostomia). Sometimes, radiotherapy causes long-lasting or permanent side effects. These are less common and may happen months or years after treatment.

You may be advised to see your dentist before you start treatment. They can advise on any dental problems and help you get your teeth and gums in the healthiest condition. They may recommend high-fluoride or non-foaming toothpaste to help maintain good oral hygiene and prevent tooth decay.

If you have any [mouth problems](#) during treatment, always tell your cancer doctor, nurse or radiographer. Many hospitals have their own mouth care guidelines for people having cancer treatment. Your doctor or specialist nurse will be able to advise you. They can prescribe mouthwashes and protective gels if needed.

Tips for dealing with a dry mouth

- Taking sips of water can help keep your mouth moist. Keep a glass of water by your bed and carry water with you when you go out.
- Add moisture to make food easier to swallow, especially dry and starchy foods like bread and potatoes. For example, you can moisten food with gravies, sauces, extra oil, salad dressing, yoghurt or butter.
- Tell your doctor about your dry mouth. They can prescribe mouthwashes, lozenges, artificial saliva spray, or gels or tablets if needed.
- Try sucking ice cubes or lollies. You can make lollies by freezing fresh juice in ice cube trays or in lolly containers with sticks.
- Chewing sugar-free gum can sometimes help you to produce more saliva.
- Use a lip balm to protect your lips. But it is important not to use any during radiotherapy treatment. Speak to your clinical nurse specialist or radiotherapy team about this.
- Try using an atomiser spray with cool water to keep your mouth moist.
- If your tongue is 'coated' it can make your food taste unpleasant and might put you off eating. Clean your tongue with a bicarbonate of soda solution. Check with your specialist nurse for further advice.
- Try to avoid alcohol (especially spirits), as these can irritate your mouth. This includes mouthwashes that contain alcohol.
- [Avoid smoking](#) – it can irritate your mouth and make it feel dry.
- Some drinks may irritate a dry mouth. Try to avoid caffeinated drinks, or citrus drinks such as those containing orange or lemon.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on be.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- [Eating problems and cancer](#)
- [Managing the symptoms of cancer](#)
- [Side effects of cancer treatment](#)
- [Understanding head and neck cancers](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk where you can [chat to us online](#).

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#).

Notes and questions
