

Sore mouth or ulcers

Some cancer treatments can damage the cells that line your mouth or throat. [Soreness and ulceration](#) of the lining of the mouth or throat is called mucositis. It can be very painful. Mucositis can be caused by chemotherapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy or radiotherapy to the head and neck. Any damage is usually temporary, and most side effects improve after treatment finishes.

You may be advised to see your dentist before you start treatment. They may recommend using high-fluoride or non-foaming toothpaste to help reduce any soreness.

Many hospitals have their own mouth care guidelines for people having cancer treatment, including the best toothpaste to use. Your specialist nurse, doctor or speech and language therapist (SLT) will talk to you about mouth care during treatment. They may also look at your mouth. Tell them if your mouth becomes sore or if the soreness gets worse. They may be able to give you mouthwashes, gels or painkillers to help.

Tips if your mouth is sore

- Drink plenty of fluids, especially water. If fruit juices sting your mouth, try less-acidic juices – for example, peach or pear nectar, or blackcurrant or rosehip syrup. Avoid fizzy drinks because these may sting your mouth.
- Try milk or milk-based drinks, such as malted drinks, milkshakes and hot chocolate. These can be from cow's milk, goat's milk or a plant-based alternative such as soya, rice or oat milk.
- Cold drinks and food may be soothing. Try adding crushed ice to drinks or eating ice cream or soft, milk jellies. Sucking on ice cubes can soothe your mouth.
- Very hot or very cold drinks may irritate a sore mouth. Some people find drinks that are lukewarm or at room temperature more soothing.
- Try drinking through a straw.
- You may find that taking painkillers before meals can help you swallow more easily.
- Avoid salty or spicy food.
- Avoid rough-textured food like toast or raw vegetables.
- Keep your food moist by adding sauces and gravies.
- Do not smoke as this can irritate your mouth and make it feel dry.
- Use a soft toothbrush to clean your teeth gently. Avoid using toothpicks when cleaning your teeth. If you want to use dental floss, check with your doctor or specialist nurse first.
- If you wear dentures, soak them in a denture-cleaning solution overnight. Leave them out for as long as you can during the day to prevent them rubbing against your gums.
- Mouthwashes can be very soothing. But many of the ones available in chemists or shops may be too strong for you. Salt-water mouthwashes can help reduce soreness, if it is not too severe. To make the mouthwash, add 1 teaspoon of salt to cold or warm water. Rinse this around your mouth. Then spit it out and rinse your mouth with cold or warm water.
- Your doctor can prescribe an anaesthetic gel, mouthwashes or painkillers to help.
- A common mouth infection called thrush (candidiasis) can make eating unpleasant and change how things taste. Thrush coats your tongue, the inside of your cheeks and the back of your throat. It can look red with spotty, pale patches. Your doctor can prescribe an anti-fungal medicine to help.
- If you are having radiotherapy to the jaw area, you may be advised to keep your dentures in as much as possible during the day. This helps to keep the shape of your gums. But if your mouth is very sore, it may be more comfortable to leave your dentures out.

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](#)
- [Side effects of cancer treatment](#)
- [Side effects from chemotherapy – easy read](#)
- [Side effects from radiotherapy – easy read](#)

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](#).

Other useful contact details

- Boots Macmillan Information Pharmacists – for free support visit www.boots.com/health-pharmacy-advice/macmillan or ask in store.

Notes and questions
