

Taking Care of Yourself While Living With Cancer

Dental Health and
Osteonecrosis of the Jaw

Dental health during cancer treatment

Cancer treatments can affect your entire body, including your teeth and gums.¹ Side effects of treatment may include inflammation of the mucous membranes in the mouth (mucositis), infections, taste changes, dry mouth, pain, tooth decay, gum disease, and sores inside your mouth.

Therefore, good dental health practices are especially important for people living with cancer. Good communication is important, too. Your dentist should know that you are being treated for cancer, and your oncologist should be aware of your dental history.

As a patient living with cancer, you should:

- Schedule a dental exam and cleaning before cancer treatment begins and periodically during the course of your treatment
- Discuss dental procedures, such as the pulling of teeth or insertion of dental implants, with your oncologist before you start your cancer treatment
- Have your dentist check and adjust removable dentures, if you have them
- Tell your physician about any bleeding of the gums, pain, or unusual feeling in your teeth or gums, or any dental infections

Regular dental hygiene is not that different for people with cancer than it is for people who don't have cancer, but because cancer treatments can affect the teeth and gums, it can be even more important.¹

If you have cancer, your routine dental hygiene should include¹:

- Brushing your teeth and tongue after every meal and at bedtime, using a soft toothbrush and gentle stroke
- Gentle flossing once a day to remove plaque (if your gums bleed or hurt, the area that is sore should be avoided, but the other teeth still should be flossed)
- Keeping your mouth moist by rinsing often with water (many medicines cause “dry mouth,” which can lead to decay and other dental problems)
- Avoiding use of mouthwash that contains alcohol

Use a mirror to check your teeth and gums daily for any changes, such as sores or bleeding gums. If you notice a problem or a change, or experience pain in your mouth, teeth, or jaws, report it to your dentist or oncologist immediately.

Osteonecrosis of the jaw

Osteonecrosis (pronounced *OSS-tee-ob-ne-KRO-sis*) of the jaw is a rare condition that involves the loss, or breakdown, of the jaw bone.² It can be a serious condition. Symptoms include, but are not limited to:

- Pain, swelling, or infection of the gums
- Loosening of teeth
- Poor healing of the gums
- Numbness or the feeling of heaviness in the jaw

If you experience any of these or other dental symptoms, tell both your oncologist and your dentist immediately and follow your oncologist's recommendations regarding continuation of your cancer treatment. Your oncologist may refer you to an oral surgeon or dental oncologist with experience in osteonecrosis.

To diagnose osteonecrosis of the jaw, doctors may use X rays or tests for infection (microbial cultures). Treatments for osteonecrosis of the jaw may include antibiotics, oral rinses, and removable mouth appliances.^{2,3} Minor dental work may be necessary to remove injured tissue and reduce sharp edges of the bone.^{2,3} Surgery is typically avoided because it may make the condition worse.^{2,3}

Scientists do not know exactly what causes osteonecrosis of the jaw or how often it occurs. This disease has occurred in some cancer patients receiving bisphosphonates. However, it is not known what role if any these medications play in its development. Some possible factors that may increase the risk of osteonecrosis include:

- Radiation therapy to the head or neck
- Chemotherapy
- Steroid therapy (for example, cortisone)
- Underlying cancer
- Anemia (low blood count) and other blood-related disorders
- Infection
- A history of poor dental health
- Gum disease or dental surgery (such as pulled teeth)
- Alcohol abuse or cigarette smoking
- Poor nutrition
- Poor blood circulation or clotting problems²

Once your cancer treatment has started, if you experience pain in your mouth, teeth, or jaw—or any other symptom of possible dental problems—tell both your oncologist and dentist immediately.

Dental care is an important element of your overall cancer care. Beginning as soon as possible after your cancer diagnosis, your treatment team should involve your regular dentist or a dental oncologist (a dentist who is specially trained to treat people with cancer).

- Be sure to tell your regular dentist that you are being treated for cancer
- Update your medical history record with your dentist to include your cancer diagnosis and treatments
- Provide your dentist and your oncologist with each other's name and telephone number for consultation

If you wish, use the form below to record information to give to your dentist and oncologist.

Dental Consultation Form

Dentist's Name: _____ Phone: _____

Oncologist's Name: _____ Phone: _____

About My Cancer Treatment

Diagnosis (Disease & Stage): _____

Date of Diagnosis: _____

Past and Planned Treatments (Date): _____

Surgery (Site: _____)

Radiation Therapy (Site: _____)

Chemotherapy

Drugs:

Immunotherapy or Other Biological Therapy

(Treatments: _____)

Steroids Bisphosphonates

Other Cancer Treatments (Please List)

About My Dental Procedures

Date of Last Complete Dental Exam: _____

Current and Planned Treatments (Date): _____

Wisdom Teeth Extraction or Other Dental Surgery

Periodontics or Other Gum Surgery

Braces or Other Orthodontics

Root Canal Therapy Sealants

Dental Implants Fillings

Dentures Bridges

Caps, Bonding, Veneers Tooth Contouring or Shaping

Crowns Bleaching

Other Dental Procedures (Please List)

References: 1. For the dental patient: oral care for cancer patients. *Am Dent Assoc.* 2002 133(7):1014. 2. National Cancer Institute. Oral complications of chemotherapy and head/neck radiation (PDQ). 2004. 3. Durie BG. Aredia/Zometa and osteonecrosis of the jaws. International Myeloma Foundation. 2004.

This document is for informational purposes and is not intended as a substitute for medical professional help or advice, nor is it intended as a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. A medical professional should always be consulted for any health problem or medical condition.