

Dry mouth

This information is about dealing with a dry mouth. [Radiotherapy to the head and neck](#) area, and treatment with some cancer drugs, can damage the salivary glands. This may [cause a dry mouth](#). The medical term for a dry mouth is xerostomia. Any damage is usually temporary, and most side effects get better when treatment ends. But sometimes side effects can be permanent.

Many hospitals have their own mouth care guidelines for people having cancer drug treatments or [radiotherapy](#). Your doctor, nurse or radiographer may advise you to see your dentist before you start treatment. They may also recommend using a high-fluoride or non-foaming toothpaste to help reduce any soreness. It is important to follow the advice of your healthcare team.

If you are having radiotherapy for a head and neck cancer, talk to your healthcare team about how to take care of your mouth and teeth.

If you have any [mouth problems](#) during treatment, always tell your cancer doctor, nurse or radiographer. They can prescribe mouthwashes, protective gels and other treatments if needed.

Tips for dealing with a dry mouth

- Take frequent sips of water or a sugar-free drink. Keep a glass of water by your bed and bring a drink with you when you go out.
- Try sucking ice cubes or lollies. You can make lollies by freezing fresh fruit juice or squash in ice cube trays or lolly containers with sticks.
- Add moisture to make food easier to [swallow](#), especially dry and starchy foods like bread, biscuits, crackers and potatoes. For example, you can moisten foods with gravies, sauces, extra oil, salad dressings, yoghurt, mayonnaise or butter.
- Chew your food well and take sips of fluid between mouthfuls.
- Chew sugar-free gum. This can sometimes help you to produce more saliva.
- Tell your doctor. They can prescribe mouthwashes, lozenges, [saliva substitute](#) sprays, gels or tablets if needed.
- Use a lip balm to protect your lips. If you are having radiotherapy or oxygen therapy, you must not use a petroleum-based lip balm such as Vaseline®. Use a water-based lip balm instead. Your clinical nurse specialist or radiotherapy team can advise you about this.
- Try using an atomiser spray with cool water to keep your mouth moist. Take it with you when you go out.
- Try to avoid alcohol, especially spirits, as these can irritate your mouth. This includes mouthwashes that contain alcohol.
- Do [not smoke](#), as this can irritate your mouth and make it feel dry.
- Try to limit caffeinated drinks, and acidic food and drinks such as citrus fruit.
- If your tongue is 'coated' this may make your food taste unpleasant and put you off eating. You can clean your tongue with a bicarbonate of soda solution. Dissolve 1 teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda (available from your chemist) in 570ml of warm water (1 pint). Dip a soft toothbrush or gauze in the solution and use it to clean your tongue.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

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

- MAC13613 [Eating problems and cancer](#)
- MAC11671 [Managing the symptoms of cancer](#)
- MAC12921 [Side effects of cancer treatment](#)
- MAC11652 [Understanding head and neck cancer](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line on **0808 808 00 00**.

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 to [chat online](#) to one of our team.

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

If you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#). Our free [Macmillan Buddy service](#) can arrange weekly calls with a friendly volunteer who understands what you're going through.

Other useful contact details

- [Boots Macmillan Information Pharmacists](#) – online or in Boots stores. Free support. No appointment necessary.

Notes and questions
