

Mouth care during and after chemotherapy

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy (chemo) is medicine that kills rapidly dividing cells, like cancer cells.

- It can also harm normal cells.
- It affects the immune system. This puts your child at risk for infection (sickness caused by germs).

Why is mouth care important while my child gets chemo?

Good mouth care can:

- Reduce your child's risk for infection.
- Prevent or reduce mouth sores.
- Prevent or reduce cavities.
- Moisten the mouth to prevent dryness and cracking.
- Remove plaque from teeth. Plaque is a sticky, clear layer of bacteria (germs) that builds up on the tooth surface.
- Remove loose debris, like food, from the mouth.

Plaque and debris in your child's mouth can hold germs. These germs can cause an infection.

What else should I know before my child starts chemo?

Talk with your nurse or doctor before your child starts chemo if they have:

- Cavities.
- Loose teeth.
- Any pain, swelling or redness in the mouth.
- Braces or dental devices. These may need to be removed before your child can start chemo.

What does good mouth care include?

Tooth brushing

- If your child does not have teeth yet, clean the gums and tongue 2 times each day with a clean washcloth and water.
- Start brushing your child's teeth when the first tooth comes in.
- Brush their teeth and tongue 2 times each day. Your child should have an adult's help to make sure they brush their teeth well.
- Brush for 2 minutes each time. Hold the toothbrush at a 45-degree angle at the top of the tooth. Brush in small circles with gentle pressure.
- Use an age-appropriate ADA (American Dental Association) approved soft toothbrush.
- Change your child's toothbrush at least every 3 months and each time they have an infection.
- Toothbrushes should not be covered and should be stored alone.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Mouth care during and after chemotherapy, continued

Toothpaste

- If your child is younger than 3 years old:
 - Use fluoride toothpaste.
 - Use a rice-sized amount of toothpaste.
- If your child is older than 3 years old but cannot spit:
 - Use fluoride toothpaste.
 - Use a pea-sized smear of toothpaste.
- If your child (at about 5 years old) can spit:
 - Use Preident toothpaste. This toothpaste has extra fluoride to better help prevent infections and protect against cavities while your child is getting chemo.
 - Your child's nurse will help you get a prescription for this.
 - Preident can only be used with children who can spit.

Mouthwash

- Use mouthwash with no alcohol, like Biotene, 3 times each day even if your child does not have teeth.
- If your child can swish and spit:
 - Swish for 30 seconds, and spit each time.
- If your child cannot swish and spit:
 - Use a foam mouth swab to wipe mouthwash inside of the mouth and on the gums each time.
- If your child has any signs of cavities or infection, their care team may order a special mouthwash to help fight germs.
- Mouthwash should never take the place of tooth brushing. Biotene mouthwash will not remove germs from your child's mouth when used alone. Be sure your child uses mouthwash and brushes their teeth.

Lip care

- Use lanolin or a water-based lubricant jelly 2 times each day to prevent or reduce dry, chapped or cracked lips. You may use:
 - Medela
 - Sage Toothette Mouth Moisturizer
 - K-Y Jelly
 - Surgilube
- Avoid using petrolatum-based products, like Carmex, Vaseline or ChapStick.
- Petrolatum-based products can trap germs on the lips and mouth.

Flossing

Flossing is **not advised** during chemo unless otherwise advised by your child's care team.

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Mouth care during and after chemotherapy, continued

What if my child has mouth sores or pain with mouth care?

- Talk with your child's nurse or doctor.
- Mouth care is very important to complete, even with mouth sores.
- Pain medicine can be given before doing mouth care.

When should I call the doctor?

Call the doctor if your child has any of these:

- A fever of 101°F (38.3°C) or higher at any time or 100.5°F (38.0°C) for more than 1 hour
- Pain not controlled by home medicines
- Mouth sores
- Any swelling of the gums
- Any swelling of the mouth or face
- Bleeding in the mouth

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's mouth care or teeth, please contact Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Department of Pediatric Dentistry and Orthodontics at 404-785-2072.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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