

RADIATION CARIES (TOOTH DECAY)



Peter Mac
Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre
Victoria Australia

Patients undergoing or having undergone radiation therapy to the head and neck region have an increased risk of tooth decay, which could result in avoidable pain, infection and tooth loss.

What is radiation caries?

Radiation caries is tooth decay that occurs as a side-effect of radiotherapy to the head and neck region. Radiation caries progresses much faster than regular tooth decay.

How does radiation caries happen?

This happens as a side-effect of radiotherapy. It reduces the amount of saliva as well as the quality and this makes it easier to develop tooth decay.

Radiation caries will usually occur on the **biting surfaces** and along the **gum line of the teeth**. Therefore, it is important to focus on these areas when cleaning your teeth.

Why is knowing this important?

With a reduced saliva flow, tooth decay can form and progress very quickly. If left untreated, it can cause **pain** and **harmful infections**.

When teeth become too decayed, treatment is usually **extraction** (tooth removal). However because of radiation therapy, this can cause further complications (problems) to the bone and tissues around teeth.

Important: If you require an extraction (the removal of teeth or a tooth), make sure to **always** contact the dental oncology team at Peter Mac (see contact information on pg. 3)

How can you prevent radiation caries?

Keeping your teeth clean is the key to prevention. You can significantly reduce the risk of decay by:

- using a high strength fluoride toothpaste (e.g., Colgate® Neutrafluor® 5000) morning and night **for life**
- **Note:** After brushing, spit, but do not rinse your mouth out
- visiting your dental care provider every 6 months
- avoiding sweet and acidic drinks and foods especially between meal times
- cleaning between your teeth every day using either floss or interdental brushes (e.g. Piksters™)
- drinking plenty of tap water throughout the day.

Talk to your dental care provider to find out more about how to properly brush and clean between your teeth to help reduce the risk of tooth decay.



Important information

If you have any concerns about your teeth or mouth, please talk to your dental professional.

You can contact the Peter Mac Dental Oncology Department on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and from 9:00am to 5:00pm on (03) 8559 6443.

email: dentalonc@petermac.org

In the event of an emergency, please dial 000 for an ambulance or go to your nearest hospital emergency department.