

XEROSTOMIA (DRY MOUTH)

Radiation to the head and neck can cause Xerostomia or dry mouth. This leads to an increased risk of tooth decay (radiation caries) as well as pain and infection. It is important to reduce these risks.

What is xerostomia?

Xerostomia is the dental term for dry mouth. It is a very common side-effect of cancer therapy. As many as **9 in 10** may get Xerostomia following radiotherapy to the head and neck.



Why does it happen?

After receiving cancer therapy, salivary glands can become damaged which can lead to reduced or complete loss of saliva flow.

Is Xerostomia a permanent side effect?

In some cases, Xerostomia **can** be a lasting side-effect of cancer therapy, but it depends on your treatment type.

- After chemotherapy, you can expect saliva flow to return in around 2-8 weeks.
- After radiotherapy, it can take up to 9 months or more for salivary glands to produce saliva to the head and neck. This will also depend on the area and strength of radiation you receive.

Why is saliva important?

Saliva has many benefits that help reduce the risk of:

- dental decay (caries)
- gum disease (periodontitis and gingivitis)
- fungal and bacterial infections in the mouth.

It also affects the way we taste, swallow and even speak!

How do you manage Xerostomia?

To help ease Xerostomia, we recommend you:

- Use dry mouth gels (i.e., Oral 7[®], Denta-Med, Biotène[®]).
- Use Peter MacCallum mouth wash morning and night. Make sure you follow the packet instructions.
- Chew sugar-free gum (especially after meals or drinks containing acid or sugar).
- Drink full cream milk with your meal. The fat found in milk may help with swallowing.
- Use gravy, sauces and/or oils to also help with swallowing.
- Cover or coat the inside of your mouth with half a teaspoon of oil at any time throughout the day or night (e.g., coconut or olive oil).

- Use XyliMelts® at any time throughout the day or night.
- Drink at least 2 litres of tap water per day.
- Limit coffee and tea as it can contribute to your dry mouth.
- Use the Visualisation Technique-
 - visualise/imagine you are sucking on something sour like a wedge of lemon.



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.