

Head & Neck Cancer

Nutrition Management Tips



Dry Mouth

It is common for your salivary glands to be affected by radiation therapy and you may experience a dry mouth and throat. The goal is to keep your mouth as moist as possible. The following are some tips to manage a dry mouth.

- Drink plenty of non-caffeinated fluids.
- Try using a humidifier when sleeping overnight.
- Try chewing sugar-free gum or sugar-free sour candy (if you do not have mouth sores) to help stimulate your salivary glands.
- Flavoring food and/or drinks with citrus, vinegar, or pickle juice can also help stimulate your salivary glands. However, you should avoid this if your mouth is sore.
- Moisten your foods with condiments, sauces, gravies, butter, jellies, etc.
- Try snacking on frozen fruit or popsicles.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco use, as well as alcohol-based mouthwashes.
- Try oral saliva substitutes such as Biotene, Xylimelts, etc, to help moisten the mouth.



Altered Taste

Your treatment for head and neck cancer can cause changes in your sense of taste. A dry mouth can also lead to an altered sense of taste, so make sure to stay well hydrated with non-caffeinated fluids.

If food tastes bitter

- Try adding salt to broccoli, cauliflower, or Brussels sprouts
- Try adding sugar or a sweetener to citrus fruits, coffee, or tea
- Add cream, creamy sauces, or cream cheese to canned fruit, veggies, crackers, hot cereal, or potatoes
- Use oil, butter, or margarine.
- Marinate meat in citrus juices, sweet and sour sauce, wine, vinegar, or barbecue sauce.
- Try eating food that is cold or at room temperature.

If food tastes bland:

- Instead of eating all of one food at a time, try eating a different food with each bite.
- Try eating a mixture of textures at your meals and snacks.
- Try to smell your food before taking a bite. Your sense of smell and taste are heavily interrelated.
- To increase flavor, try adding citrus fruits, fresh garlic, herbs/spices, honey, jam, ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard, or raw onion to your foods.
- Add broth/stock, gravies, marinades, salad dressing, vinegar, sauces like soy sauce or barbecue sauce, or maple syrup to liquids to add flavor.

If food tastes too sweet, try adding:

- A small amount of salt in food/beverages.
- A sour flavor with citrus fruits, juices, or vinegar.
- Instant coffee, nutmeg, cinnamon, or cocoa powder can be used for sweet foods.
- Beverage suggestions: lemonade, homemade iced tea, vegetable juice, or diluted sports drinks.

If food tastes too salty:

- Do not add any additional salt or salt-based seasonings to your cooking. Instead, try adding flavor with non-salted herbs and spices.
- Avoid highly processed foods that are typically higher in sodium, such as frozen meals, pre-packaged foods, canned foods, etc. Opt for fresh or homemade foods or look for low—or reduced-sodium or no-added-salt products if possible.
- Rinse canned foods with water in a colander before eating.
- Try adding sugar or a sweetener to foods and liquids.

If you have a metallic taste:

- Avoid using metal utensils and glasses. Use plastic silverware and drink out of plastic or glass cups.
- Use glass cookware and bakeware.
- Avoid canned goods; choose frozen, fresh, or homemade options.
- Try mouth rinses, using sugar-free candies, gum, or mints before eating.
- Meat can often have a metallic taste. To hide the taste, mix meat into casseroles, stews, and soups. You can also try eating meat at a cold temperature or using marinades with citrus, Italian dressing, vinegar, sweet and sour sauce, teriyaki sauce, or barbecue sauce.
- If you cannot tolerate meat due to its metallic taste, opt for non-meat protein sources like eggs, nuts, nut butters, dairy products, beans, etc.

Sore Mouth



- Opt for softer foods like applesauce, pudding, yogurt, cottage cheese, scrambled eggs, mashed potatoes, ice cream, or milkshakes.
- Avoid acidic foods, spicy foods, or highly salted foods.
- Make sure to reach out to your healthcare team if oral pain is preventing you from eating or drinking.

Difficulty Swallowing or Painful Swallow



- It is common to experience some level of difficulty or discomfort with swallowing as treatment progresses. Some people may even experience this before the start of treatment. You may need to modify your diet to consistencies that you can tolerate. You may need to add condiments, gravies, butter, sauces, etc, to foods to assist in swallowing. When swallowing becomes more difficult, it is common for people to need to eat more soft/smooth foods like mashed potatoes, yogurt, applesauce, pudding, etc. You may even need to opt to consume more liquids like soups, milkshakes, smoothies, and protein shakes. You can even try using a protein shake as a base for a shake or smoothie with added ingredients such as ice cream, fruits, vegetables, yogurt, peanut butter, etc, to ensure you get enough calories and protein to maintain your weight.
- If you are experiencing significant difficulty swallowing, coughing, or breathing with oral intake, please inform your healthcare team immediately. You may benefit from a referral to a speech-language pathologist to help assess your swallow function and provide you with exercises to strengthen the muscles utilized with swallowing.
- Some people may rely on a feeding tube to provide them with nutrition and hydration during and after completion of their treatment. The goal is to maintain proper nutrition and weight during your treatment. If you need to utilize a feeding tube, we will work on increasing your oral intake and weaning you off your tube feeding.

