

Mouth sores

What are mouth sores?

Mouth sores are painful, irritated areas in your child's mouth. They can be caused by some cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy or radiation. Mouth sores usually heal but can be painful until they do. The medical name for mouth sores is mucositis (mew koh SY tis).

The treatments that cause mouth sores also may give your child a sore throat, upset stomach, and diarrhea. If your child has any of these symptoms, tell the St. Jude staff.

How to prevent mouth sores

Your child should not eat salty or spicy foods or dry, crunchy foods that could scrape her mouth. The nurse or the dietitian can tell you which foods might irritate the mouth. The best foods for your child are soft foods like applesauce, pudding, ice cream, and mac 'n' cheese. She should drink plenty of water. The nurse can tell you if other fluids are all right to drink. St. Jude dietitians created "Do You Know... Sore Mouth Diet," which offers ideas for the best foods and drinks for your child's sore mouth. Ask a dietitian or your nurse for a copy.

During chemotherapy, the nurse may give your child ice chips to suck on or eat. This can help keep her mouth moist during treatment.

Other ways to prevent mouth sores:

- Have your child brush her teeth 15 minutes after eating and 15 minutes after mouth care. Some of the mouth care rinses and medicines are made with sugar, which can increase the risk of cavities if left on the teeth. Your child may floss if she can do it without irritating her mouth.
- Always have your child brush her teeth after eating sweets or sugary foods.
- Use a soft toothbrush. Let it dry completely after each use.
- If your child cannot brush her teeth, you can clean them with moist gauze wrapped around one (1) finger, a small sponge, or a foam toothbrush. The St. Jude staff can help you find these items.
- If your child tends to swallow toothpaste, use plain water to clean her teeth.
- Use a new toothbrush every day if your child had a bone marrow (stem cell) transplant. Also, use a new toothbrush every day if she has a low white blood cell count, an infection, or bleeding in her mouth. Otherwise, use a new toothbrush every 2 months.
- Before chemotherapy or radiation, your child may need to see a dentist. Your doctor will tell you if this is needed.

This document is not intended to take the place of the care and attention of your personal physician or other professional medical services. Our aim is to promote active participation in your care and treatment by providing information and education. Questions about individual health concerns or specific treatment options should be discussed with your physician.

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- If your child had a transplant, has gum disease, or has a risk of mouth sores, she should use a mouthwash called chlorhexidine gluconate (also known as Peridex[®]) 3 times a day. Your child's doctor must prescribe it. Then the staff will give you the mouthwash or you will pick it up at the Outpatient Pharmacy. If your child gets a mouth sore, stop using this mouthwash and tell the St. Jude staff.

Check for mouth sores

Tell the St. Jude staff right away if your child has any of these signs:

- Blisters, sores, or white patches in the mouth
- Blisters on the lips
- Pain on the lips or in the mouth
- Sore throat
- Upset stomach, cramps, or diarrhea
- Bleeding from the gums
- Trouble swallowing, eating, or drinking
- Extra fluid in the mouth or throat
- Fever – an oral temperature of 100.4 degrees F (38 degrees C) or higher

If your child has a mouth sore, the St. Jude staff will look at the sore often. A staff member will assign the sore a grade (or level) based on how the sore looks and how it feels to your child. Grades range from 0 to 5, with 5 being the most painful.

If your child has mouth sores

If your child gets mouth sores, the St. Jude staff will treat them. This will make your child more comfortable and keep the sores from getting infected. The nurse may give your child a certain mouthwash, gel, or spray to make the sores hurt less. Your child might also take medicine to decrease the pain or stop an infection.

Playing or doing activities like arts and crafts or homework can help your child stop thinking about mouth sores. This can help her feel less pain.

Like a scab on the skin that gets picked at, sometimes a mouth sore can bleed. It can bleed just a little or sometimes it is more severe. If your child's mouth sores are bleeding a lot, St. Jude staff may give her some extra blood to replace what she loses. If your child needs this treatment, the doctor or nurse will tell you.

Questions?

If you have questions or concerns about mouth sores or how to prevent them, talk to your child's doctor or nurse.

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