

Mouth Care

What is happening

Good mouth care is very important during serious illness and hospice care.

Dry mouth and mouth discomfort are common and may:

- Make eating and drinking difficult
- Cause pain or irritation
- Affect comfort and communication

Even when patients are eating or drinking very little, mouth care remains important.

Common causes of dry mouth or mouth discomfort

Dry mouth and mouth irritation may be caused by:

- Medication side effects
- Mouth breathing
- Dry air
- Dehydration
- Infection

Other possible causes include:

- Thrush (candida infection)
- Mouth sores from prior chemotherapy or treatments
- Herpes infections
- Poorly fitting dentures

Some medications such as steroids or antibiotics may increase the risk of mouth infections.

What you may see

- Dry or cracked lips
- Thick saliva or mucus
- Bad breath
- White patches in the mouth
- Mouth sores or redness
- Difficulty swallowing or eating
- Complaints of burning or pain

What you can do

Keep the mouth moist and clean

- Keep lips moist using products such as:
 - Lip balm
 - Vaseline
- Clean dentures regularly
- Make sure dentures still fit comfortably, since fit may change as illness progresses

Gentle mouth care

- Brush teeth gently if tolerated
- Mouth swabs may help when brushing becomes difficult

Reduce dryness

- Discuss using a humidifier with the hospice team if the room air feels very dry
- Ask whether additional fluids are appropriate and safe

Medications and treatment

Many medications can contribute to dry mouth.

Do not stop medications without discussing them with the hospice team.

If infection or thrush is present, effective treatments are often available.

When to call hospice

- Mouth pain or sores worsen
- White patches or signs of infection appear
- Swallowing becomes more difficult
- Dry mouth becomes severe
- Dentures no longer fit properly
- You are concerned medications may be contributing to symptoms