

Basic Care: Mouth Care

What is happening

Good mouth care is an important part of comfort-focused hospice care.

Dry mouth and mouth discomfort are very common and may:

- Interfere with eating or drinking
- Cause pain or irritation
- Affect communication and overall comfort

Even when patients are eating or drinking very little, regular 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 room air
- Dehydration
- Infection

Other possible causes include:

- Thrush (candida infection)
- Mouth sores from chemotherapy or other medical conditions
- Herpes infections
- Poorly fitting or unclean dentures

Steroids and antibiotics may increase the risk of mouth infections.

What you may see

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

What you can do

Keep the mouth moist and clean

- Keep lips moist with:
 - Lip balm
 - Vaseline
- Clean dentures regularly
- Check whether dentures still fit comfortably, since fit may change with weight loss or illness progression

Gentle mouth cleaning

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

Ask the hospice team about available mouth-care supplies.

Reduce dryness

- Consider discussing a humidifier with the hospice team if the room air is 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 develops, effective treatments are often available.

What to discuss with hospice

This symptom can often wait until the next scheduled hospice visit unless severe.

Discuss:

- Possible dehydration
- Mouth sores or infection
- Concerns about medication side effects

- Whether medications should be adjusted

When to call hospice sooner

Call sooner if:

- Mouth pain becomes severe
- Swallowing suddenly worsens
- Bleeding or severe sores develop
- The patient cannot tolerate mouth care
- You are concerned about infection or significant discomfort