

## Painful Eating and Swallowing

This handout provides tips for people who experience pain when they eat or swallow.

Sore mouth, throat and painful swallowing may be due to tumours in the mouth or throat, may be a side effect of treatment or surgery, or following dental procedures. Pain **may** lead to poor food and fluid intake and weight loss. This can reduce your physical wellness and quality of life.

### Symptoms

- Mouth ulcers and soreness
- Pain and burning after swallowing
- Reflux or indigestion
- Feeling of food being stuck

If your painful swallow is due to tumour obstruction, it may improve during treatment. If your symptoms are a side effect of treatment, they will usually increase during treatment and may continue for a few weeks afterwards.

### Nutrition Goal

- The goal is to obtain enough nutrition to meet your needs and **maintain your weight.**

- Adequate nutrition will also help with healing and recovery from treatment and general wellbeing.

Pain medicine, mouth cares and changing the texture of your foods can help prevent and relieve pain so that you are able to eat and drink more.

### Pain relief

- Use prescribed pain relief as guided by your health care team such as:
  - *Anaesthetic/antibacterial mouthwashes (alcohol free)*
  - *Soluble Panadol*
  - *Prescribed pain medicine*
  - *Anaesthetic/numbing agents e.g. Xylocaine Viscous*
- **Tell your doctor if your pain is not under control. Your pain medication may need changing.**
- Be mindful of the timing of your medicine – often it is useful to take your pain medicine before eating to help manage your pain.
- Be careful with hot food and drinks after using anaesthetic/numbing agents.

## Mouth cares

*Follow good oral hygiene* to help keep your mouth clean to reduce the risk of infections and ease pain:

- Brush your teeth gently using:
  - a soft/children's toothbrush
  - a mild toothpaste containing fluoride
- Rinse your mouth after you eat, using either:
  - ¼ teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda (bi-carb soda) in 250ml cup of luke warm water - rinse mouth well and spit out
  - ¼ teaspoon of salt in 250ml cup of luke warm water - rinse mouth well and spit out
  - Alcohol free mouthwash
- Keep your mouth and lips moist by using lip balm/moisturiser, sucking on ice chips or sipping fluids.
- If your mouth is dry, try using sugarless gum/lollies and dry mouth products (available at the chemist).
- If you wear dentures:
  - Rinse them after you eat to remove food debris
  - Soak them overnight in a denture cleaning product
  - Remove them if they are causing pain and irritation.

Your treatment centre will be able to advise suitable products and how to use them.

## Diet changes to make eating easier

- Choose soft/moist foods that are easier to chew and swallow.
- Soften foods by finely chopping, mincing or blending e.g. minced meats, flaked fish, mashed fruit and vegetables.
- Add moisture to foods e.g. sauces, gravies, margarine, cream, custard
- Soften food by dipping in warm drinks or soup.
- Sip fluids with your meals to keep your mouth moist and help wash food down.
- Using a straw may help to avoid irritation in the mouth. However, if you find using a straw makes swallowing more difficult or makes you cough, then stop using it.
- Avoid foods if they sting the inside of your mouth/throat or burn after swallowing. These may include salty foods, spices, fruit or vegetable juice, vinegar and alcohol.
- Avoid extreme hot or cold food and drinks if they cause you pain. Warm or cool food and drinks may be better tolerated.
- Avoid (or soften) rough, crunchy or dry foods such as crisps, nuts, dry biscuits, toast etc.

## **If you are eating less due to pain and notice you are losing weight**

- Try smaller, more frequent meals - aim for 6 small meals per day.
- Add extra nourishment:
  - High protein choices: meat, chicken, fish, eggs, dairy products, beans, lentils, nut pastes.
  - High energy choices: butter, margarine, cream, avocado, oil.
- Try nourishing drinks such as milkshakes, smoothies or supplement drinks e.g. Sustagen or Ensure.

These changes may only be temporary. If you are concerned about any long-term health effects, please discuss with your Dietitian.

**Please note**, you should request to see a speech pathologist if you:

- have **difficulty swallowing** rather than pain, and/or
- are **coughing or choking** when eating or drinking.

## **Who can help?**

**Doctors** – speak to your medical team for advice on suitable pain relief.

**Nursing staff** – can assist with your mouth care routine.

**Pharmacist** – can help you manage your medicines to ensure safe and optimal use. Discuss with a pharmacist if your medicine can be crushed if required.

**Dietitian** – can advise you on food choices or supplement drinks to suit your needs if you are losing weight or finding it difficult to eat.

**Speech Pathologist** – can advise you on safe food and fluid choices if you are having difficulty swallowing or you are coughing or choking when eating or drinking.

**Dentist** – can also provide advice on pain management and dry mouth products.

## **For more information**

- Speak to your Doctor or Dietitian
- Call the Cancer Council helpline: 13 11 20 (toll free)  
Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

Dietitian:

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Contact:

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