

Cancer treatment and its effect on the mouth and teeth

It is important to know that cancer from other parts of the body have many side effects which affect your mouth. Most people are aware of common side effects of cancer treatment such as nausea and hair loss but are unaware of the complications which can develop in the mouth and how it can affect your teeth. While cancer treatment can cause many side effects in the mouth it is also important to know that the condition of your teeth and the overall health of your mouth and gums can cause complications during the treatment of cancer.

Prior to starting treatment for cancer it is important to see your dentist to have a complete exam. Treatment of cancer results in a compromised immune system and patients are at a great risk for infections and these infections even from a dental problem can cause severe complications and can even be fatal. A dental exam allows for all caries and gum disease to be treated and also to recommend the extraction or removal of teeth which are in poor condition and likely to become a problem during cancer treatment. It is important to be free of active dental disease prior to starting treatment.

Most treatment for cancer involves radiation or chemotherapy. Radiation induced side effects in the mouth usually occur when radiation is used to treat head and neck tumors. Chemotherapy side effects in the mouth can occur with any cancer in any part of the body. Complications from radiation include mucositis, xerostomia, secondary infections, sensitivity of teeth, osteonecrosis and muscle trismus. Mucositis is the breakdown of tissues in the oral cavity leading to ulcers, pain, difficulty swallowing and chewing, and loss of taste. Xerostomia is dry mouth. Dry mouth can lead to rampant decay and difficulty in chewing and swallowing foods. Xerostomia can resolve quickly following radiation therapy or take 6 to 12 months to return to normal or it may never return to normal. Secondary infections commonly involves Candidiasis and also can be bacterial or viral. Complications from chemotherapy include bleeding and ulceration of gum tissues, excessive bleeding with minor trauma, xerostomia, and anemia.

Prior to starting treatment for cancer your dentist will have worked with you to eliminate infection, treat all carious lesions, institute periodontal disease control, and reviewed with you oral hygiene instructions. During treatment for cancer your dentist can help you maintain your oral hygiene and help you deal with any side effects of treatment. If mucositis develops your dentist can prescribe a mouthwash to help relieve the pain and provide a protective coating. Management of xerostomia involves fluoride prescription and trays, salivary substitutes and possibly medication to stimulate salivary flow. Secondary infections which arise can be treated appropriately depending on the cause.

Prior to starting cancer treatment it is imperative to see your dentist. By getting treatment prior to starting treatment for cancer there can be fewer complications during treatment and you increase the likelihood of completing treatment with minimal damage to your teeth. It is also important to remember that regular checkups and cleanings every 6 months with your dentist can help to keep your teeth healthy and trouble free.

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