How Does Cancer Affect Your Dental Health?

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Cancer and Oral Wellness

Due to the reduced filtration in your body, your mouth will likely have a decrease in saliva production, causing dry mouth. Your oral tissues may also look pale and you may complain of having a metallic taste in your mouth. The scent of your saliva can even carry an ammonia-like scent.

The lack of healthy saliva flow can predispose you to both gum disease and tooth decay, so you'll want to have regularly scheduled preventive care visits to clean your teeth and be screened for conditions such as cavities or bone loss.

Your dentist will also likely advise you to use a supplemental fluoride to combat the effects of dry mouth on your teeth. Xylitol gum can be used throughout the day as well to repel new plaque buildup from congregating in the mouth as well as stimulate saliva production.

The Effects of Cancer Treatment on Your Teeth

Depending on the type of treatment your oncologist prescribes, chemotherapy and radiation can both produce common side effects that impact your oral health. Patients that undergo these classic styles of cancer treatment may experience problems like dry mouth, burning mouth, poor appetite, alterations in taste, and an increase in oral diseases like cavities and gum disease.

Keeping your mouth healthy during your treatment is very important. If possible, get your oral care needs to be caught before beginning your cancer treatments. This way it will be more comfortable, and even easier to treat. Many problems such as cavities will only grow rapidly if the right environment such as dry mouth occurs. The earlier your care is performed, the smaller and more affordable it will be, preserving as much healthy tooth structure as possible.

Gum Pallor

Pale gum tissue is likely due to anemia. Anemia can also cause your gum tissues to bleed easily, even if you do not have active gingivitis or gum disease.

Your dentist or hygienist may be able to note other oral signs of anemia during your check-up, such as a cracked or fissured tongue surface. Follow your doctor's instructions as it relates to iron supplements and dosages each day.

Burning Mouth Syndrome

Stomatitis is when oral tissues are red and have a burning sensation. This can create a painful experience and even make it difficult to eat a balanced diet.

When burning mouth is present, some dentists recommend a “miracle mouthwash” to relieve symptoms. This is done by mixing one part milk of magnesia and one part liquid antihistamine together and rinsing or swabbing the inside of the mouth. Just take care to not accidentally swallow the mix.

Increased bleeding

Bleeding gum tissues will most likely be a side effect as well. Keeping bacterial levels down in your mouth will reduce the likelihood of plaque biofilm being able to enter into your bloodstream.

Brushing regularly with a soft toothbrush and continuing to floss each day is important. You may want to consider alternative oral hygiene devices such as water flossers, which usually result in little to no bleeding and may even clean your teeth more effectively than traditional flossing.

If you do bleed heavily, consideration will need to be given before you have any type of invasive dental procedures performed, such as extractions. Although bleeding can be caused by various diseases, it can also be caused by lack of oral care. Make sure it isn’t the latter.

Osteonecrosis

Some medications taken by patients battling kidney cancer are linked with dental and jaw problems. Sunitinib has been shown in rare circumstances to result in osteonecrosis of the jaw. That is, the jawbone is damaged and begins to fade away. This can be a problem if you have dental procedures that need to be completed, such as an extraction.

Your dentist will need to know that you’re taking this medication, and possibly get clearance from your doctor first. Let both your dentist and doctor know if you begin to experience any mobility in your teeth or numbness throughout your jaw.

Because bone loss is so prevalent, your dentist may decide to take some more proactive steps to reverse areas of moderate bone loss before they become severe. This might involve locally placed medications tucked under the gum lines in the areas where infection or bone loss is evident.

It’s important to see your dentist regularly rather than when oral complications begin to develop when you’re living with kidney cancer. By taking proactive preventive care steps, your dentist can help you reduce the likelihood of losing your teeth from the disease. If this can’t be avoided, your dentist will review tooth replacement options with you so that you can maintain a healthy lifestyle, diet, and appearance.