TASTE LOSS
Loss of taste can be a rapidly occurring side effect of radiation therapy. Taste loss generally occurs during the first week of treatment. This is usually temporary and taste sensation returns two to four months following radiation therapy.

TRISMUS
Spasm of the jaw muscles (trismus) usually occurs when these muscles are in the field of radiation. The jaw muscles feel tight, and limit your ability to open the mouth for long periods. This can make it difficult to clean the mouth effectively.

What can you do?
- Daily mouth exercises and stretching of jaw muscles will help to maintain maximum jaw movement.

BONE COMPLICATIONS
Radiation therapy decreases the blood supply to bone and tissues, slows down healing, and makes bone more prone to infection. Simple measures can be adopted to prevent infection and trauma to jaw bones.

What can you do?
- Make sure that you have a dental check-up as soon as you know you need radiation therapy.
- If you need dental extractions, arrange for them to be done at least 2–3 weeks before radiation therapy to allow enough time for healing.
- Get your dentures checked by a dentist. Ill-fitting or loose dentures can result in ulcers which may lead to infection.
- Brush and floss teeth after eating and before bed using fluoride toothpaste.
- Follow additional advice given to you by your dentist and cancer care team.

REMEMBER
- Get a dental check-up as soon as you know you require radiation therapy. Then, any necessary dental treatment can be completed before your radiotherapy begins;
- Your dentist will develop a special dental care program tailored to your needs;
- Brush and floss teeth after every meal and before bed using a mild flavoured, fluoride toothpaste and a small, very soft toothbrush;
- If you have any concerns regarding your dental health, discuss these with your dentist, dietician and oncologist.

For further information on dental care or the range of mouth care products currently available, please contact the Dental Health Education Unit.
Phone (08) 9313 0555
Email: dheu@dental.wa.gov.au
Alternatively visit www.dental.wa.gov.au

It is important that your mouth is in good health before cancer treatment begins as this reduces the risk and severity of mouth problems.
Radiation therapy to the head and neck can lead to complications in and around your mouth. This may include:

- a dry mouth;
- sore mouth;
- infection;
- rapid tooth decay;
- a loss of taste; and,
- jaw stiffness; and,
- jaw bones changes.

**HOW CAN YOUR DENTIST HELP YOU?**

Organise to have a thorough dental examination prior to radiation treatment. Your dentist, dietician and oncologist working together will play an important role in your dental management. Your dentist will work out a dental treatment and preventive program specifically for your needs.

### DRY MOUTH

One of the first problems that you may experience following radiation therapy is a dry mouth (xerostomia). Salivary flow is reduced and your saliva becomes thick and ropey. This makes you prone to mouth infections, gum disease and tooth decay.

**What can you do?**

To help relieve your dry mouth, and make it easier to eat and to swallow, try...
- using a dry mouth moisturising product, olive oil in a spray bottle or K-Y jelly to moisten the mouth or under dentures;
- sipping or rinsing your mouth with water or sucking on ice chips;
- chewing ‘sugar-free’ gum or sucking ‘sugar-free’ sweets to help stimulate salivary flow.

Always brush and floss teeth after eating and before bed using fluoride toothpaste and a small, very soft toothbrush.

### SORE MOUTH

During radiation therapy, the oral tissues can become red, swollen and ulcerated (mucositis) causing soreness and burning of the mouth and tongue. The degree of discomfort will vary depending on the dosage and duration of radiation therapy and will heal during the weeks after radiation is completed.

**What can you do?**

- Eat a soft-food diet.
- Avoid sugary, spicy, acidic foods, tobacco and alcohol.
- Brush and floss teeth after eating and before bed. Use a mild flavoured, fluoride toothpaste and a small, soft toothbrush.
- Replace your toothbrush often.
- Throughout the day, rinse your mouth with a sodium bicarbonate mouthwash (1 tsp sodium bicarbonate + 1 tsp salt + 500 mls water). Discard after 6 hours.
- Ask your cancer care team about medicines that can help with the pain.
- **Follow additional advice given to you by your dentist and cancer care team.**

### INFECTION

Dry mouth and damage to the lining of your mouth from radiation therapy and a weakened immune system make it easier for infection to occur. Sores and ulcerations can become infected by virus, bacteria or fungus. *Thrush (Candidiasis)*, is a common fungal infection seen in the mouth of patients undergoing radiation therapy. It helps to check your mouth every day for sores or other changes.

**What can you do?**

- Choose foods that are good for you and easy to chew and swallow.
- Take small bites, chew slowly and sip liquids with your meals.
- If you have difficulty swallowing, soften food with sauces and liquids.
- Rinse with water frequently to relieve dryness in your mouth.
- When required use antifungal agents as prescribed by your doctor or dentist.
- Brush and floss teeth after eating and before bed using fluoride toothpaste.
- If you use dentures, keep them clean and wear as little as possible until infection clears. Remove before sleeping.

### TOOTH DECAY

People receiving radiation therapy are at greater risk of developing tooth decay because of dry mouth. Without saliva the mouth is less self-cleansing. Acid in the mouth is not neutralised and minerals are lost from teeth. Decay develops very rapidly, so preventive measures should begin before undergoing radiotherapy and continued throughout.

**What can you do?**

- Attend for regular dental check-ups
- Limit your intake of sweet, sticky foods and sweetened or acidic drinks.
- Although “diet” drinks don’t contain sugar, they are frequently acidic and may weaken tooth enamel. Limit the frequency and duration of their use.
- Water is the best thirst quencher
- You may be recommended to have nutritional supplements that are often high in sugar, so discuss this with your dietician and dentist.
- Brush and floss teeth after eating and before bed using fluoride toothpaste and a soft toothbrush.
- **Follow additional advice given to you by your dentist and cancer care team.**