

Mucositis

Introduction

Mucositis is a painful condition in which the lining of the mouth is sore and inflamed. This occurs as a result of chemotherapy, bone marrow transplants or radiation of the head and neck area.

Whether you get Mucositis will depend on the type of chemotherapy you are receiving and the radiation dose. If you are having head and neck radiotherapy it is likely you will have some degree of Mucositis. Around 40% of chemotherapy patients and 75% of bone marrow transplant patients develop the condition.

Mucositis is more common in younger people than older people.

Symptoms

During chemotherapy the lining of the mouth may become thin; there may be surface sloughing of tissue and you may develop ulcers.

During radiotherapy the lining becomes inflamed, reddened and swollen and later in treatment may be covered by a thickened crust.

Pain from Mucositis can be severe. The degree of pain is usually related to the extent of the tissue damage. Pain is often described as a burning sensation accompanied by reddening. It may become very difficult to speak and eat. If ulcers are present they may bleed or become infected.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is based on the symptoms you have and the appearance of the tissues of the mouth following chemotherapy, bone marrow transplant or radiotherapy. The appearance will be of red burn-like sores or ulcers throughout the mouth. Mucositis from chemotherapy usually begins 4-5 days after treatment is started, reaches its peak at 7-10 days and slowly goes away over the next 5-7 days unless there are complications such as infection.

Mucositis associated with radiotherapy usually appears at the end of the second week of treatment and may last for 6-8 weeks.

Treatment

With grateful acknowledgement of the Hospice Association of the Witwatersrand

Treatment of Mucositis from all causes is the same. The treatment will depend on the severity of the symptoms you are experiencing and your white cell blood count.

It is very important that your mouth is kept particularly clean. You should clean your mouth every 4 hours and at bedtime, more often if the Mucositis becomes worse. You should use a soft bristle toothbrush such as baby's toothbrush to avoid damaging the lining of the mouth further.

A water soluble jelly will help to lubricate the mouth. Rinse your mouth frequently with a bland rinse or plain sterile water. This helps to remove food particles and bacteria from your mouth, will moisten and soothe the lining of your mouth and gums and prevent crusts forming on any sores. A salt mouthwash is perhaps best. Do not use proprietary mouthwashes which often contain alcohol and will make the condition worse.

Drink plenty of fluids, at least 3 litres a day and avoid alcohol. Eat soft foods or moisten dry foods to make them softer and less rough on the sore areas. Avoid citrus or spicy foods which will aggravate the sore areas. Eat either cold or warm foods as hot foods may make symptoms worse.

If you are a denture wearer, keep these out as much as possible between meals to avoid them rubbing on the sore areas.

Smoking or use of any other tobacco products will slow recovery from mucositis.

The pain from mucositis can vary from mild to severe. In mild cases topical pain relief such as gels or creams can be useful. For moderate pain, painkillers such as paracetamol may help to provide relief. Do not take aspirin if you are receiving chemotherapy as this may cause bleeding. In severe cases your doctor may prescribe stronger painkillers either by mouth or injection. A mouth wash containing local anaesthetic, coating agents and/or morphine may be prescribed by your hospice doctor. 'Magic mouth ointment' is another formulation that might be prescribed by hospice. Please discuss these treatments with your hospice sister.

If the mucositis is particularly severe it may be necessary to temporarily suspend any chemotherapy or radiation treatment.

Complications

The areas involved in mucositis may become infected and antibiotics may be needed to control the infection.

There may be bleeding, usually only if you are undergoing chemotherapy. In severe cases

there may be inability to breathe and eat normally. Always contact your hospice sister if -

- Mouth sores become so painful you cannot eat or talk
- Mouth sores last longer than expected, or
- Your temperature is over 38 degrees