

Mouth and Throat Problems

Kim Olson was introduced to golf by his grandfather at age 10.

"I've been playing off and on ever since then. I love to play. It's difficult; it's humbling; you hit a good shot: there's nothing quite better than that."-Kim, Patient

Kim is driven. So, since he was diagnosed with throat cancer three years ago, Kim's been determined to keep doing things he enjoys.

"Through this process, I've been able to keep playing. It's a part of my life – it's being active."-Kim, Patient

He's stayed active despite the side effects of Chemotherapy and radiation. Among them: problems in his mouth and throat.

"It became more of an effort to do you know activities of daily living, eating and drinking were no longer possible as I had in the past."-Kim, Patient

"There are numerous side effects from treatment but it's really important that you communicate with your doctors and the nurses, to make sure that they are aware of what's going on, so they can help you get through this because most of the side effects are manageable."-Dr. Vishal Gupta, MD, Radiation Oncologist

Those side effects can include mouth sores - small cuts or ulcers that can be very painful. Special rinses or prescription medications are available that can help. If you're on chemotherapy, sucking on ice chips before and after treatment can help keep mouth sores from getting worse. This may not be okay to do with some chemo medicines, so ask your provider first. Also, rinse regularly with an alcohol-free mouthwash. Another common side effect: thick saliva.

"Saliva has a thin component and a thick component. During treatment, the thin component goes away, so the patients just have thick saliva left over."- Dr. Vishal Gupta, MD, Radiation Oncologist

This can cause discomfort and interfere with eating, swallowing, and even talking. To thin out saliva: stir a teaspoon of baking soda and a teaspoon of salt into a quart of water – and rinse with it throughout the day. Rinsing with mouthwash or certain other liquids can also provide relief to those with this side effect.

"There's seltzer water or soda water that they can rinse or gargle with. Papaya juice can be used to cut through that saliva as well."- Dr. Vishal Gupta, MD, Radiation Oncologist

Dry mouth is also a possible effect. For relief: drink lots of water. But steer clear of high-sugar beverages such as soda and fruit juice, which can dry out your mouth. Suck on ice chips; and use a cool-mist humidifier, especially overnight.

"There are some mouth sprays that are available that can help reduce some of the dryness. There are some sugarless candies and lozenges that can work to help stimulate some saliva. But the main thing is to just keep

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hydrated." - Dr. Vishal Gupta, MD, Radiation Oncologist

Cancer treatment can also cause difficulty swallowing, which can make it tough for people to eat – and affect their nutrition.

"They can have smaller bites of food; they can chew for a little bit longer so that the food is much smaller when it goes down; they can use a straw; they can blend their food, or have it puréed; they can drink protein shakes. Those will all help to increase their calorie intake." - Dr. Vishal Gupta, MD, Radiation Oncologist

And, finally – cancer treatment can affect your taste buds: some foods may not taste good, or you may lose your sense of taste temporarily.

"As a result, you may limit foods or avoid them altogether. This may lead to nutritional deficiencies or weight loss." - Kari Ikemoto, Registered Dietician

"Green beans with lots of fiber."

Meeting with a nutritionist can help you learn different ways to prepare and season foods.

"Adding more herbs, spices, marinades, or sauces can help foods taste better. Things like rosemary, oregano, garlic, onion, ketchup, barbeque sauce, mint can all be flavor enhancers." - Kari Ikemoto, Registered Dietician

Nine months after his treatment ended, Kim's still having problems with taste and other mouth and throat issues. Though in most cases these side effects eventually go away, some can last up to a year, so Kim recognizes his experience is par for the course.

"I'm still hoping my sense of taste will improve, that I'll be able to salivate a little bit better, but my sense is optimism that my cancer has responded well and that I can still be active." - Kim, Patient