Radiation Therapy – Sore throat and mouth

Radiation therapy to the neck or chest can cause irritation to the esophagus. This is the "swallowing tube" that carries the food from your mouth to your stomach. This irritation may cause pain, or it may cause the sensation of having a "lump in the throat." You may feel like food is getting stuck (although food almost never actually gets stuck). As with many radiation side effects, this problem generally develops two to three weeks into a course of radiation therapy, and generally improves in three to four weeks after the treatment is over. Sore throat may be worse in patients who have also received chemotherapy as part of their treatment.

Patients who get radiation therapy to the mouth, face or lips may develop a sore mouth. You may get what looks and feels like severe canker sores in your mouth. The time course is the same as sore throat, but this condition may cause you significant discomfort and difficulty eating.

Recommendations for sore throat and mouth:

- Avoid alcohol and tobacco. Drinking and smoking make these symptoms much worse.
- Avoid very hot or very cold foods. Let food reach a moderate temperature before eating.
- Take small bites and chew food thoroughly before swallowing. You may even need to change to a soft or liquid diet. Our dietitian can help you make the needed changes in your diet. It is important to keep your nutrition up, even though it can be difficult.
- If you have a sore or dry mouth, you may have lots of thick, sticky saliva. Rinse your mouth several times a day with a gentle salt and soda mouth rinse. Mix 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon baking soda in eight ounces of warm water. Rinse your mouth with this as frequently as needed. Do NOT use commercial mouthwashes – these contain alcohol and may cause more pain.
- Drink plenty of fluids and use a vaporizer or humidifier in the home when air is dry. This helps keep your mouth and esophagus moist, which reduces pain and discomfort.
- If you are given a prescription, use it as directed. Make sure you let your doctor or nurse know if the prescription is helping.