

## Alteration of the Oral Mucous Membranes in Cancer Patients

### Abstract

**Purpose/objectives:** to describe the problem of oral mucositis during cancer treatment; its prevalence; pathology; manifestations; pathophysiological consequences; psychosocial consequences; surveillance and measurement, and discuss the nursing critical role in the management of this problem before; during; and after cancer treatment.

**Data source:** published articles/ abstracts, books, computerized data base, and clinical experience. Most recent and relevant material was selected for use in this paper.

**Data synthesis:** The management of oral complications of cancer treatment is an important and time-consuming part of the oncology patient care. Oral toxicities may compromise the clinician's ability to give full neoplastic therapy, potentially requiring dose reduction or treatment schedule modifications, including delays. Treatment cessation may be indicated in some situations because these complications are a significant cause of patient discomfort and may result in treatment refusal if not properly handled (Silverman, 2002). Since oral complications in its early stages is often managed by medical personnel other than physician, the oncology nurse is in a pivotal position to recognize these complications and evaluate their potential for inducing life-threatening consequences in cancer patients.

**Conclusion:** Oral care is a basic nursing activity central to patient comfort and well being. It is particularly important in patients with cancer when both the disease and treatment can cause significant problems and an increased risk of infection. Oral health is important, the presence of dental disease and mucositis affecting the most basic of human functions of communication, eating, social interaction, taste and breathing. It can be a dose limiting toxicity of treatment, and an important source of bacteremia, which can cause life-threatening infections. Combined with severe pain and distress, the impact can be devastating. The problems can cause delays in treatment and unnecessary prolongation of hospitalization or re-admission, which is both costly and distressing to the patient whose time may be at a premium.

**Implications for nursing practice:** The evidence suggests that mucositis is not preventable in cancer patients, but severity can be minimized through the implementation of effective oral health practices. A realistic objective is to reduce the severity and duration of mucositis and to minimize the complications of pain, oral and systemic infection, bleeding and malnutrition. To achieve this, it is important for nurses to: identify those patients at risk of developing oral complications as soon as possible, have a knowledge and understanding of chemotherapy agents used and their effects, have a knowledge and understanding of head and neck radiotherapy and its effects on the oral cavity have an appropriate assessment tool that determines the most appropriate evidence based interventions for each identified problem.