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Tiny infection in mouth can turn fatal for oral cancer survivors

They must be meticulous about keeping their mouths clean as radiotherapy makes them prone to infections.

POON CHIAN HUI reports

By Poon Chian Hui



-- ST PHOTO: KELVIN LIM

Getting cancer was bad enough, thought Ms Mariati Ismail, 36, when she had a 4cm-wide cancer tumour removed from the inside of her right cheek in April. She did not realise that her problems were far from over.

The radiation treatment that followed to kill any residual cancer cells left her with dry mouth. It also stifled her immune system, so she contracted a candida fungal infection. Painful ulcers grew in her mouth.

'The ulcers made eating difficult and were painful,' said the office administrator, who is still on long-term medical leave.

Her weight dropped from 45kg to 39kg.

One in three oral cancer patients has to put up with this sort of mouth problems, said Cancer Research UK. And they may lead to infections as the mouth tissues of such patients take a longer time to heal.

The cause is radiotherapy, a necessary treatment with some unpleasant side effects, said Dr Victor Fan, senior consultant oral and maxillofacial surgeon of National University Hospital.

Without surgery or radiotherapy, patients are likely to die. With treatment, about 50 per cent of patients will survive the cancer. In Singapore, about 100 to 200 new cases of oral cancer are diagnosed every year, said Dr Fan.

Ms Mariati, who had 30 sessions of radiotherapy in June, needed antibiotics to combat the infection. The ulcers have subsided but she still suffers from dry mouth.

Termed xerostomia, the condition is characterised by poor saliva flow. This can spell danger in the form of serious cavities and mouth infections, said Dr Fan.

'Saliva has a natural cleansing action,' he said. 'A lack of saliva coupled with poor oral hygiene can lead to mouth infections, which can be deadly for oral cancer sufferers as radiotherapy suppresses the immune system.'

He had a patient whose gum infection progressed to multiple organ failure in a matter of weeks despite strong antibiotics.

'Mouth infections can progress very fast in oral cancer patients who have undergone radiotherapy,' he said. 'By the time they seek medical help for a fever or pain, the infection may have already spread to other parts of the body.'

Patients must be meticulous about keeping their mouths clean, even after they are clear of the cancer, he added.

In addition to regular brushing and flossing of their teeth, they should go for frequent dental check-ups.

To prevent cavities, one can also apply fluoride gel to the teeth using a mouth tray and use mouthwashes regularly. But some commercial mouthwashes are unsuitable for such patients.

'Radiotherapy can cause the mouth to become very sore, so the chemicals in some mouthwashes can be very painful for them,' explained Dr Fan. Instead, they need to opt for mouthwashes containing natural enzymes which help to digest food trapped in the mouth. Available at hospital pharmacies, they also counter xerostomia by moisturising the mouth.

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