Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Oral Irrigations

This resource explains how to do oral irrigations (also called rinses).

About oral irrigations

Oral irrigations are done to keep your mouth clean and moist. Irrigate your mouth when you wake up in the morning, after eating, and at bedtime. Your nurse can give you an oral irrigation bottle to rinse your mouth with. You can also do these steps with the solution alone.

Sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) rinses are often used for oral (mouth) care. These rinses:

- Help keep mouth tissue moist and clean.
- Help prevent infection.
- Can prevent and treat oral mucositis (swelling or sores in your mouth) in people getting chemotherapy (chemo).
- May improve comfort and overall quality of life.

How to do oral irrigations

1. Gather your supplies. You will need:

- An irrigation bottle (optional)
- A towel or plastic bib
- Table salt
- Baking soda

2. Place a towel or plastic bib around your neck to protect your clothes.

3. To make the rinse, pour 1 quart of warm tap water into the bottle. Then add:

- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda

4. Place the pointed edge of the bottle in your mouth (see figure 1). Squeeze the bottle until the rinse comes out.



Figure 1. Doing an oral irrigation

5. Move the tip of the bottle around your mouth while squeezing out the rinse. Be careful not to squeeze towards the back of your mouth because it could make you gag.
6. Let the rinse drain from your mouth into the sink or a basin.
7. Continue to use the rinse until your mouth is fully clean.
8. Follow the steps in the “How to clean your oral irrigation set” section to clean your oral irrigation set.

How to clean your oral irrigation set

1. Wash each part of your set with soap and warm water.
2. Dry the inside of the bottle with a paper towel. Throw out the paper towel.
3. Place a dry paper towel inside the bag to absorb any moisture. Leave the paper towel in the bag until you use it again.
4. Store your oral irrigation set in a cool, dry place until you use it again. On warm days, you can place your clean irrigation bottle in a plastic bag and store it in your fridge.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Oral Irrigations - Last updated on February 24, 2026
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center