Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Using Moisture to Manage Dry Air

This information explains how to use moisture to help with trouble breathing during dry months.

In the winter, the air is drier than in other seasons. Heating or air conditioning systems can also make air drier. When there isn't enough moisture in the air, the lining of your mouth, nose, and throat can become dry. This can lead to crusting and bleeding.

The lining of your mouth, nose, and throat are probably more sensitive to dry air if you've had:

- Radiation therapy to your mouth, throat, nasal cavity, or sinuses.
- Surgery that required a tracheostomy tube (a small tube placed in your neck to help you breathe).
- Surgery to remove your larynx (voice box). This is called a laryngectomy.

How to use moisture to manage dry air

Here are some ways you can use moisture to manage dry air:

- Use a humidifier
  - Buy humidifiers for rooms where you spend most of your time. Try to buy a warm-mist humidifier (also called steam or evaporative humidifiers) instead of a cool-mist one (also called ultrasonic or impeller humidifiers).
  - Place a humidifier by your bed so you breathe moisturized air while you sleep.
  - Use distilled water to limit the amount of minerals that build up in your humidifier.

    - Make sure to clean your humidifier so it doesn't grow mold. Follow the instructions that it came with.
- Run a hot shower for 10 minutes to steam up the bathroom and breathe in the warm mist for 30 minutes to keep your nose and throat lining moist:
    - When your nose or throat is feeling dry.
    - Daily in the winter months (to prevent dryness).
- Use the "low" setting on your heating or air conditioning systems instead of the "high" setting.
- Drink 8 (8-ounce) glasses (2 liters) of liquids a day.
    - Limit how much coffee, tea, and soda you drink. These caffeinated drinks are diuretics and cause you to urinate (pee) more.
    - If you have a feeding tube, add an extra 2 cups (480 milliliters) of water in divided doses to your free water flushes.
- If you have dryness in your nose:
    - Use a nasal saline spray (such as Ocean®) as needed.
    - Apply a water-based cream (such as Eucerin®) to the inside of your nose.
- If you have a tracheostomy tube or have had a laryngectomy:
    - When you are inside, try to be in a room with a humidifier.
    - If you can't be in a room with a humidifier or you are outside, place moist gauze over your tracheostomy tube or laryngectomy stoma. The gauze will warm, filter, and moisturize the air you breathe. Change the gauze regularly so it stays moist.

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.

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