Head and Neck Cancer: Side Effects of Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy: the goal is tumor control with minimal treatment complications

Radiation side effects:

- Dry mouth (xerostomia) due to the loss of saliva. Stay hydrated and avoid spicy foods
- Change in thickness of saliva
- Changes in taste which may affect food intake
- Pain when swallowing (odynophagia). Trouble swallowing (dysphagia)
- Pain in the mouth and/or throat which can affect food intake
- Decreased tongue strength
- Inflammation of the lining on the inside of the mouth and throat (mucositis). This can be painful and affect food intake. Chemotherapy can worsen the condition. Oral hygiene and changing the consistency of food is most important. Avoid spicy, acidic, sharp, or hot food, and alcohol
- Excessive formation of scar tissue (fibrosis), and not being able to open the mouth to full capacity (trismus). Fibrosis of the muscles involved in chewing can cause trismus. Jaw exercises can be helpful. Swallowing may become a problem due to fibrosis and a diet change is needed, throat strengthening exercises, or retraining the swallow
- Voice changes (hoarseness)
- Tiredness (fatigue). Fatigue can increase over time, but will resolve after radiation therapy. Reasons for this may be anemia, decreased food and liquid intake, medications, lack of sleep, anxiety, or depression. Get plenty of rest and do not overwork yourself
- The neck may develop a woody texture and have limited movement. Neck exercises can decrease neck tightness and increase mobility. Physical therapy might be helpful to break down the fibrosis
- Dental cavities. Dental hygiene is very important to prevent cavities and infection