

Trismus: Are You at Risk?



UHN

For patients who have head and neck cancer

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- What is trismus
- What causes trismus
- Who is at risk of getting trismus
- How trismus can affect you
- How to check for signs of trismus
- How you can prevent trismus
- What to do if you have signs of trismus

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What is trismus?

Trismus is a condition that affects the muscles that control your jaw, making it harder to open your mouth.

What causes trismus?

There are many causes of trismus. For patients with head and neck cancer, trismus can be caused by:

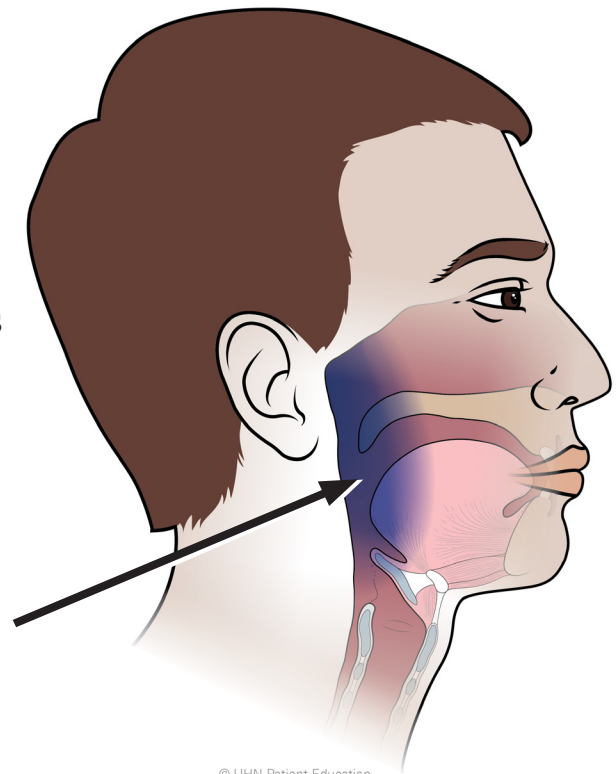
- The location of your tumour
- Radiation treatment or surgery

These can cause stiffening (fibrosis) of your jaw muscles.

Who is at risk of getting trismus?

- Trismus occurs in about 40% of people (40 out of 100 people) who have had treatment for head and neck cancer.
- You are at higher risk for getting trismus if you have treatment to the area behind the nose or mouth.
- Trismus develops over time. It can happen during treatment, right after treatment or years after your cancer treatment is done.
- In most people, trismus develops slowly.
- You may not notice trismus until it starts to limit your day-to-day activities (for example, brushing your teeth, eating).

In this image the arrow shows a shaded area behind your nose and mouth. You are at higher risk for getting trismus if you have treatment to these areas.



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How can trismus affect you?

If you have trismus:

- It can be hard to brush and floss your teeth. This can make it hard to clean the inside of your mouth. This puts you at a higher risk for bacteria build-up, tooth decay and infection.
- It can be hard to chew. Not chewing your food enough may result in attempts to swallow chunks of food that are too big. This can increase your risk of choking, or blocking your airway.
- You may be limited in the variety of foods you can eat.
- If trismus is severe, you could be only able to drink fluids.
- It can be hard to speak. Limited movement of the lips, tongue and jaw may make speech less clear.

Trismus can cause:

- Stiffness, pain, discomfort and clicking jaw sounds when speaking or eating
- Ear pain

Trismus can also make it difficult to:

- Do mouth check-ups (oral exam)
- Do dental check-ups
- Use dentures or dental prosthesis (false teeth)
- Put in a breathing tube (intubation) in the event of a hospital emergency or future surgery

For these reasons it is important to check for signs of trismus so that you can prevent it from developing or getting worse.

How can you check for signs of trismus?

A typical mouth opening for an adult is about 40-50 mm. This is about the height of 3 fingers stacked on top of each other and placed between your top and bottom front teeth.

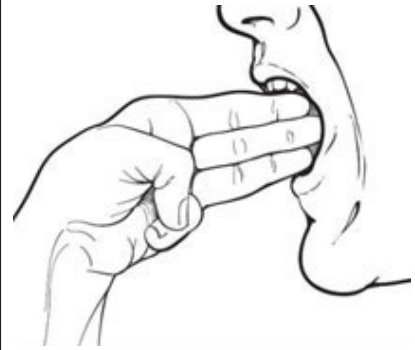
Check yourself to detect trismus early:

Do the quick test below once a month. If you wear dentures, keep them in for this test:

- 1) Open your mouth as wide as you can
- 2) Bring your index, middle and ring fingers together (3 fingers seen in image to the right)
- 3) Gently put these 3 fingers into your mouth between top and bottom teeth (as seen in the image to the right)
- 4) Do not use your fingers to force your mouth open

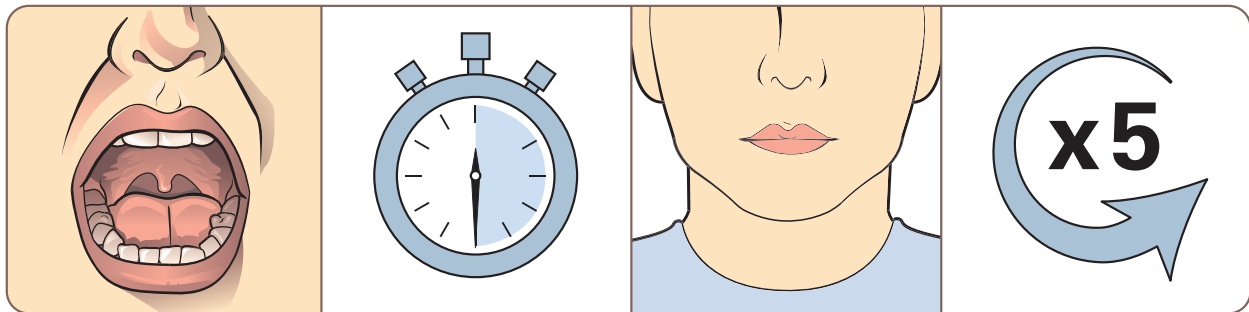
You have trismus if you are not able to do this easily.

The typical mouth opening for an adult is about 3 fingers high.



How can you prevent trismus?

- If your mouth opening is 3 fingers high now but you are at risk of getting trismus in the future, do the mouth stretching exercises below every day.
- You are at risk for getting trismus if you had treatment to the area behind your nose or mouth.



1. Open your mouth as wide as you can without pain

2. Hold for 30 seconds

3. Relax

4. Repeat this 5 times.

Do this up to 5 times each day.

What to do if you have signs of trismus

Tell a member of your health care team if you:

- Cannot get 3 fingers between your top and bottom teeth
- Notice any stiffness, pain or clicking when opening your mouth

If you have any concerns, call the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre's Head and Neck Clinic at: 416-946-2000 ext. 2206 (press 2) to speak to a Specialized Oncology Nurse (cancer nurse).

Ask a team member to refer you to the Trismus Class.