Management of radiation therapy-induced mucositis in head and neck cancer patients. Part II: supportive treatments

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Abstract Oropharyngeal mucositis is the acute inflammatory and ulcerative reaction of the oral mucosa following radiation therapy to the head and neck region. It is such a common problem that nearly all head and neck cancer patients develop some degree of mucositis. This complication is usually transient in nature but it also represents an important clinical problem as it is a painful, debilitating, dose-dependent side effect for which there is no widely acceptable prophylaxis or effective treatment. As several authoritative groups have recently either undertaken systematic reviews or issued guidelines on the management of mucositis, it is the aim of this review instead, to provide an overview of all the remedies and pharmaceutical agents available, as well as highlighting to researchers the gaps that need to be filled.

Keywords Head and Neck Cancer · Radiation Therapy · Mucositis · Management · Pharmaceutical Agents

Introduction

Radiation therapy (RT) is an important and indispensable mode of treatment for head and neck cancers, with up to 75% of all head and neck cancer patients receiving it [1]. As it is currently not possible to prevent radiation therapy-induced mucositis (RM) from happening, most healthcare workers aim to at least provide symptomatic relief to alleviate patients’ suffering. This is done with the use of oral rinses, topical application of disinfecting agents and antimicrobials, and the use of anti-inflammatory and analgesic agents, as well as some non-pharmaceutical products. This is aimed at reducing the severity of mucositis as well as enhancing healing by shortening the process of mucositis. This article will provide an overview of pharmaceutical products as well as alternative and natural therapies used to treat RM. A summary of the different agents is listed in Table 1.

Pharmaceutical supportive treatment

The treatment of RM is not well established. The agents