THE ARISING · CANCER SURVIVORSHIP

Life after cancer

Restoring the comfort of an ordinary meal

November 5, 2026 · John Griffin, MD



An experimental gene therapy brought sustained dry-mouth relief to people living with a lasting consequence of head-and-neck cancer treatment. The result points toward a larger ambition for cancer medicine: help people recover the ordinary pleasures that treatment can leave behind.

A meal, a conversation, a night's sleep. Persistent dry mouth can make each of them difficult. Radiation can damage the glands that supply saliva, leaving survivors to manage symptoms long after cancer treatment has ended. Restoring that function would change the texture of an ordinary day.

Giving surviving cells a new instruction

The treatment, AAV2-hAQP1, delivers the gene for aquaporin-1, a protein that forms a channel for water. Researchers introduced it through the natural duct into one or both parotid salivary glands. The aim is to help the remaining cells move water into saliva.

In the phase 1 study, 24 adults with moderate or severe radiation-related dry mouth received treatment and were followed for a year. Symptoms improved by the first month and the improvement persisted through month 12. At that point, 19 of the 24 participants rated their dry-mouth symptoms importantly better.

Measured saliva flow also increased. All participants completed follow-up, and the investigators reported no treatment-related serious adverse events or dose-limiting toxicities. The study was small and had no control group, so the size of the treatment benefit needs a controlled comparison.

The next test is already under way

The randomized, blinded, placebo-controlled AQUAx2 study is testing the same approach. Its registry lists 290 participants and a main outcome based on dry-mouth symptoms at 12 months. As checked November 5, it is active but no longer recruiting, with no results posted in the registry.

The next result to watch is whether the symptom improvement holds up against placebo, alongside saliva measurements and safety follow-up. Both the early study and AQUAx2 are supported by the therapy's developer, MeiraGTx.

What the advance is for

Surviving cancer opens the door to more life. Restoring function helps people use it. A treatment that makes eating and speaking more comfortable could give people more room for shared meals, unhurried conversations and participation in the world around them.

That is why survivorship deserves a place beside tumor response in the story of medical progress. The abilities left after treatment help determine what the years ahead can contain.

This is an Arising adaptation of the full article in the November 5 research edition, pages 65–67. The underlying study was published online May 29 and in the October 1, 2026 journal issue.

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