

# Oral Cancer

## Causes and Symptoms & The Oral Cancer Exam

### What is oral cancer?

The term oral cancer includes cancers of the mouth and the pharynx (the back of the throat).

### What puts someone at risk for developing oral cancer?

**Tobacco and alcohol use.** Most cases of oral cancer are linked to cigarette smoking, heavy alcohol use, or the use of both tobacco and alcohol together. *Using tobacco plus alcohol poses a much greater risk than using either substance alone.*

**HPV.** Infection with the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus (specifically the HPV 16 type) has been linked to a subset of oral cancers.

**Age.** Risk increases with age. Oral cancer most often occurs in people over the age of 40.

**Sun exposure.** Cancer of the lip can be caused by sun exposure.

**Diet.** A diet low in fruits and vegetables may play a role in oral cancer development.

### What are the possible signs and symptoms of oral cancer?

- A sore, irritation, lump or thick patch in the mouth, lip, or throat
- A white or red patch in the mouth
- A feeling that something is caught in the throat
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Difficulty moving the jaw or tongue
- Numbness in the tongue or other areas of the mouth
- Swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable
- Pain in one ear without hearing loss

A person who has any of these symptoms for more than 2 weeks should see a dentist or doctor for an oral cancer exam. Most often, symptoms like those listed above do not mean cancer. An infection or another problem can cause the same symptoms. *But it's important to have the symptoms checked out—because if it is cancer, it can be treated more successfully if it's caught early.*

### What is the oral cancer exam?

An oral cancer examination can detect early signs of cancer. The exam is painless and takes only a few minutes.

During the exam, a dentist or doctor checks the face, neck, lips, tongue, mouth, and the back of the throat for possible signs of cancer.

## Additional Reading

### Review articles on oral cancer

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