

Oral Cancer

Are You at Risk?

What Are the Signs
& Symptoms?

Should You Have an
Oral Cancer Exam?

About Oral Cancer

Oral cancer includes cancers of the mouth and pharynx (the back of the throat).

Oral cancer accounts for roughly three percent of all cancers diagnosed annually in the United States. Approximately 48,000 people will be diagnosed with oral cancer each year and about 9,600 will die from the disease.

On average, 64 percent of those with the disease will survive more than 5 years.

Oral cancer most often occurs in people over the age of 40 and affects more than twice as many men as women.

What Puts Someone at Risk?

Tobacco and alcohol use.

Tobacco use of any kind, including cigarette smoking, puts you at risk. Heavy alcohol use also increases your chances of developing the disease. And 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.

Possible Signs & Symptoms

See a dentist or physician if any of the following symptoms lasts for more than 2 weeks.

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

Early Detection

It is important to find oral cancer as early as possible when it can be treated more successfully.

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

Your regular dental check-up is an excellent opportunity to have the exam. During the exam, your dentist or dental hygienist will check your face, neck, lips, and entire mouth for possible signs of cancer.

Some parts of the pharynx are not visible during an oral cancer exam. Talk to your dentist about whether a specialist should check your pharynx.

This pamphlet was developed by the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research with the National Cancer Institute, components of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md.

For more copies contact:

National Institute of Dental
and Craniofacial Research
National Oral Health Information
Clearinghouse
1 NOHIC Way
Bethesda, MD 20892-3500
1-866-232-4528
www.nidcr.nih.gov

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