

What You Need to Know About Oral Cancer

Oral cancer can affect any part of the mouth, lips, or the back of the throat. About 35,000 Americans are diagnosed with some forms of oral cancer each year, and of those, approximately 7,500 will die from the condition. Most oral cancers — about two-thirds — are found in the mouth, while the rest are found in the pharynx, a part of the throat that's just behind the mouth and nasal cavity.

Who Is at Risk for Oral Cancer?

You are at increased risk of developing oral cancer if you:

Use tobacco products. Tobacco use — smoking cigarettes, pipes, or cigars, or using snuff or chewing tobacco — causes 75 percent of all cases of oral cancer.

Drink alcohol. Heavy alcohol use, especially when combined with tobacco use, increases your risk of developing oral cancer.

Get too much sun, which can increase your risk of developing lip cancer.

Eat an unhealthy diet, which can increase your overall cancer risk.

Are over the age of 40. Most people who are diagnosed with oral cancer are over 40.

Are male. Oral cancer is twice as likely to affect men as women.

Therefore, you can reduce your risk of oral cancer by eating a healthy diet, avoiding tobacco, drinking alcohol only in moderation, and limiting your exposure to the sun.

Signs and Symptoms of Oral Cancer

Oral cancer symptoms include:

A lump, sore, irritation, thick patch, or rough spot anywhere in your mouth, throat, or on your lips

A red or white patch or bump in your mouth

A sensation that something is stuck in your throat

Problems with swallowing or chewing

Difficulty moving your tongue or jaw

A numb or painful tongue or numbness in other areas of your mouth

A swollen jaw

Ill-fitting dentures

Ear pain without loss of hearing

A mouth or lip sore that won't heal or bleeds easily

Change in color of your mouth

While these symptoms may also indicate less serious health issues, if you experience any of them for more than two weeks, see a dentist for evaluation.

The Importance of Regular Dental Checkups

Checking for oral cancer is a regular part of dental check-ups. At each check-up, your dentist or hygienist will examine your entire mouth for signs of precancerous spots and may spot something before you can see it.

If your dentist finds a suspicious spot, he may perform a brush test, in which cells are collected from that lesion and sent to a lab for testing. If any precancerous cells are found, treatment will usually involve surgical removal of the lesion. The tissue will then be sent to a lab to determine if it's truly cancer. Radiation may also be needed.

The Long-Term Outlook for Oral Cancer

The survival rate for people who have oral cancers is poor — just about half of all of those diagnosed with oral cancer survive beyond five years. This is probably because a lot of oral cancer is caught in later stages, when it's harder to treat. That's why it's so important to seek regular dental care, so your dentist can identify suspected oral cancers early and you can be treated as soon as possible.

Regular checkups and good dental care are your best defenses against oral cancer and other oral health conditions.

