



Each year in the US alone, approximately 30,000 individuals are newly diagnosed with oral cancer. If you add throat cancers to the number (which have the same risk factors), that number will increase to about 42,000 people. The death rate from oral cancer is very high; about half those diagnosed will not survive more than five years. While these statistics are alarming, this high death rate is directly related to two factors. These may be directly influenced by your choices.

**The first is to be aware.** Knowing that lifestyle choices you make, such as the use of tobacco and other risk factors listed in this brochure are causes of this disease, is part of that process. Approximately 75% of all oral cancer patients are tobacco users. Avoidance of risk factors greatly reduces your chance of developing oral and throat cancers. Knowing the signs and symptoms of the disease is also part of awareness. It is one that will help you decide to seek professional advice should you recognize symptoms in yourself. Just by reading this brochure you are engaging in an educational process that will keep you, and those you share the information with, aware and educated about the disease.



- **Be aware**
- **Avoid risk factors**
- **Get an annual screening**

**Early detection is the second factor that will reduce your risk.** Once knowledgeable, you will wish to engage in a regular annual screening to look for signs and symptoms at your doctor's office, ensuring early detection. Oral cancer can be caught early, even as a pre-cancer. With early detection, survival rates are high, and side effects from treatment are at their lowest. These screenings are painless, quick, and inexpensive. Like other screenings you engage in such as cervical, skin, prostate, colon, and breast examinations, oral cancer screenings are an effective means of finding cancer at its early, highly curable stages. Make them part of your annual health check-ups.

## Signs and Symptoms

In the early stages of oral cancer's development, it often is painless, and the physical signs may not be obvious. This makes it a very dangerous disease. Regular screenings by a qualified medical or dental professional, combined with a person's knowledge of the warning signs and symptoms, will allow its discovery in the earliest possible stages, when cure and survival are most likely. Even pre-cancerous tissue changes can be detected by a trained professional.

### Early indicators

1. Red and/or white discolorations of the soft tissues of the mouth.
2. Any sore which does not heal within 14 days.
3. Hoarseness which lasts for a prolonged period of time.

### Advanced indicators

1. A sensation that something is stuck in your throat.
2. Numbness in the oral region.
3. Difficulty in moving the jaw or tongue.
4. Difficulty in swallowing.
5. Ear pain which occurs on one side only.
6. A sore under a denture, which even after adjustment of the denture, still does not heal.
7. A lump or thickening which develops in the mouth or on the neck.



## The good news: It can be found early in its development

Today while you are at the doctor's office, in just 3 to 5 minutes, you can receive a comprehensive oral cancer examination. This exam should include a visual and tactile exploration of the interior of your mouth, as well as the underside of your chin and neck. Some doctors may use a special light or a special dye to aid in the discovery of tissues which are suspicious. If an area of concern is located, the doctor may use a small brush to collect cells from that area for examination under a microscope. If the doctor suspects that something is abnormal, it is standard procedure to refer you to a specialist for another opinion, and perhaps even a small, painless biopsy of the tissue in question. Referral for a second opinion should not alarm you, but assure you that the doctor wants to conclusively determine what any abnormality may be. Most abnormalities turn out to be benign conditions. This quick and inexpensive cancer examination will allow any serious condition to be caught at the earliest possible time, when treatments are the most effective. An oral cancer screening such as this should be conducted every year, and is easily incorporated into your routine visits for health check-ups, or cleanings and regular exams at the dental office. For those who engage in known risk factors such as the use of tobacco, it should be done more frequently. In the future, new discovery and diagnostic tools currently being tested and developed may be used. However, the visual and tactile screening techniques available today are more than adequate to find oral cancers in their most highly curable stages. The entire healthcare team at the office, including the nurse or the dental hygienist, may be involved in portions of this examination. All are concerned with seeing that any area of suspicion is caught.



common, individuals carrying them are not likely to know that they have it, as there are no outward symptoms. Currently there are no preventative or avoidance measures that will prevent sexual transmission of this virus. However, limiting the number of sexual partners decreases your risk of contracting the virus.

3. **Race, ethnicity, and economics.** There are socio-economic factors that influence the development of cancers in different groups of people. For instance, while not related to biology, blacks are diagnosed with oral cancer 2 to 1 over other races. In addition, people who live in areas with poor access to healthcare, or for economic reasons do not routinely visit a dentist or doctor, are also at increased risk.
4. **Recurrence.** Previous head and neck cancer patients have a higher risk of a cancer recurrence which may occur in the mouth or other areas of the aero-digestive tract.
5. **Gender.** Statistically males get oral cancer more often than females. Again, this is not related to biology but lifestyle issues.

## Risk Factors

Factors you can control

1. **Tobacco use.** In all its forms, tobacco is the largest contributor to the development of oral or mouth cancers. Not using tobacco is the single most important thing you can do to avoid oral cancers.
  2. **Excessive alcohol consumption.** More than 15 alcoholic beverages per week may put you at greater risk. If you must drink, do so in moderation.
  3. **The combined use of tobacco and alcohol.** This significantly increases the risk of oral cancer more than either by itself.
  4. **Excessive unprotected exposure to sun.** Unprotected exposure to sun will increase the likelihood of lip cancers. Use at least SPF 30 sunblock on your lips.
  5. **Low intake of fruits and vegetables.** A diet that does not contain the protective nutrients of these foods increases the risk of developing a variety of illnesses including oral cancer.
  6. **Use of betel nut and betis.** When chewed or smoked, these are causative agents of mouth cancers. Avoid their use.
- Risk factors not in your control, or in which control is limited**
1. **Age.** Older individuals tend to develop more disease in general, including oral cancer, as their immune system becomes less efficient.
  2. **HPV viral infection.** Increasing numbers of young, non-smoking individuals are being diagnosed with oral cancer. The most likely causative factor is HPV viral infection, the same virus responsible for more than 95% of all cervical cancer. It can also be a co-factor and facilitator in tobacco induced cancers. While testing for the virus at the time of cervical examinations and PAP smears is becoming more

# Oral Cancer

## What you need to know.



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