



Oral Cancer Awareness

Recognizing the Signs, Understanding the Risks, and Protecting Your Oral

Health

What Is Oral Cancer?

Oral cancer is a type of cancer that develops in the tissues of the mouth or throat. It can occur on the:

- Lips
- Tongue
- Floor of the mouth
- Cheeks
- Gums
- Roof of the mouth (palate)
- Back of the throat (oropharynx)

Like many cancers, oral cancer is most treatable when it is detected early. Regular dental examinations and awareness of possible warning signs can play an important role in early diagnosis.

Why Early Detection Matters

Many cases of oral cancer cause little or no pain during their early stages. Because of this, people may not notice a problem until the disease has progressed.

Early detection can:

- Improve treatment outcomes
- Increase the chances of successful treatment
- Reduce the need for extensive surgery
- Improve quality of life

Routine oral cancer screenings performed during dental examinations can help identify suspicious changes before symptoms become severe.

Who Is at Risk?

Anyone can develop oral cancer, but certain factors increase the risk.

Major risk factors include:

Tobacco Use

Smoking cigarettes, cigars, pipes, and using smokeless tobacco products significantly increases the risk of oral cancer.

Alcohol Use

Heavy alcohol consumption increases the risk, especially when combined with tobacco use.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Certain types of **human papillomavirus (HPV)**, particularly **HPV-16**, are associated with many cancers of the oropharynx (the middle part of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils).

Sun Exposure

Excessive ultraviolet (UV) exposure increases the risk of cancer of the lips.

Using lip balm with sun protection and limiting excessive sun exposure may help reduce this risk.

Age

Oral cancer is more common in adults over the age of 40, although it can occur at any age.

Additional Risk Factors

Other factors may include:

- Previous oral cancer
- Weakened immune system
- Poor nutrition
- Family history of certain cancers

Having one or more risk factors does **not** mean a person will develop oral cancer, and some people diagnosed with oral cancer have no known risk factors.

Warning Signs and Symptoms

See a dentist or healthcare provider if you notice any of the following lasting **more than two weeks**:

- A sore that does not heal
- A lump or thickened area in the mouth
- Red, white, or mixed red-and-white patches
- Persistent mouth pain
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Difficulty moving the tongue or jaw
- Persistent sore throat
- Hoarseness or changes in the voice
- Numbness of the lips or tongue
- Loose teeth without an obvious cause
- A lump in the neck

These symptoms do **not** necessarily mean cancer is present, but they should always be evaluated.

What Happens During an Oral Cancer Screening?

An oral cancer screening is quick, painless, and usually performed during a routine dental examination.

Your dentist may:

- Examine the lips, cheeks, gums, tongue, palate, and floor of the mouth
- Look for unusual sores, lumps, or discoloration
- Feel the tissues of the mouth and neck for abnormalities

- Evaluate any areas that appear suspicious

If necessary, your dentist may recommend additional testing or referral to a specialist.

Can Oral Cancer Be Prevented?

Not all cases can be prevented, but healthy lifestyle choices can reduce your risk.

You can help protect yourself by:

- Avoiding tobacco products
 - Limiting alcohol consumption
 - Receiving the HPV vaccine when recommended
 - Using lip protection with sunscreen during prolonged sun exposure
 - Eating a balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables
 - Visiting your dentist regularly for examinations
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Oral Cancer and HPV

HPV is a common virus that is spread through close personal contact.

Most HPV infections resolve naturally without causing health problems. However, persistent infection with certain high-risk HPV types may increase the risk of developing cancers of the oropharynx.

Vaccination against HPV is recommended for children and adolescents and may also be appropriate for some adults, depending on age and individual circumstances. Discuss vaccination with your healthcare provider.

When Should You Seek Medical Attention?

Contact a dentist or physician promptly if you experience:

- A mouth sore lasting longer than two weeks
- Persistent difficulty swallowing
- Ongoing hoarseness
- Unexplained bleeding in the mouth

- A lump in the mouth or neck
- Persistent numbness or pain

Early evaluation does not necessarily mean cancer is present, but it allows serious conditions to be identified or ruled out as soon as possible.

Protecting Your Oral Health

Routine dental examinations are important not only for preventing cavities and gum disease but also for detecting signs of oral cancer.

Maintaining good oral hygiene, avoiding tobacco, limiting alcohol, and seeking evaluation for persistent oral changes are important steps toward protecting your overall health.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Oral cancer can develop in the lips, mouth, tongue, or throat.
 - ✓ Early stages may cause little or no pain.
 - ✓ Tobacco use, heavy alcohol consumption, and HPV infection are major risk factors.
 - ✓ Mouth sores or unusual changes lasting longer than two weeks should be evaluated.
 - ✓ Regular dental examinations include screening for abnormal oral tissues.
 - ✓ Early detection greatly improves the chances of successful treatment.
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