

# Oral cancer: what you need to know



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## The Mouth-Body Connection

As part of a routine dental exam, the dentist screens patients for cancer of the head and neck, including oral cancers. Other types of cancers the dentist may recognize include skin cancer, cancer of the jaw bone and thyroid cancer.

Oral cancer, the sixth most common cancer, accounts for about 3.6 percent of all cancers diagnosed, with roughly 40,000 new cases reported annually in the United States.

The vast majority of oral cancers occur in people older than 45 years, with men being twice as likely as women to develop the disease. Of all major cancers, oral cancer has the worst five-year survival rate at about 54 percent. Because oral cancer is usually not diagnosed in its early stages, less than half of all oral cancer patients are cured.

### Causes of oral cancer

Scientists aren't sure of the exact cause of oral cancer. However, the carcinogens in tobacco products, alcohol and certain foods, as well as excessive exposure to the sun have been found to increase the risk of developing oral cancer. Risk factors for oral cancer may also be genetically inherited.

### Warning signs for oral cancer

Oral cancer may appear as red, white or discolored lesions, patches

or lumps in or around the mouth. It is typically painless in its early stages. As the malignant cancer spreads and destroys healthy oral tissue, the lesions or lumps become more painful. However, oral cancer is sometimes difficult to self-diagnose so routine dental exams are recommended. See your dentist immediately if you observe:

- any sore that persists longer than two weeks;
- a swelling, growth or lump anywhere in or about the mouth or neck;
- white or red patches in the mouth or on the lips;
- repeated bleeding from the mouth or throat; or
- difficulty swallowing or persistent hoarseness.

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## Screening for oral cancer

Your dentist should screen for oral cancer during routine checkups. He or she feels for lumps or irregular tissue changes in your neck, head, cheeks and oral cavity, and thoroughly examines the soft tissues in your mouth, specifically looking for any sores or discolored tissues.

## Oral cancer treatments

If your dentist suspects oral cancer, a biopsy of the lesion is required to confirm the diagnosis. Surgery is required to remove the tumors. Radiation therapy may be used as part of the treatment.

## What you can do

You can help prevent oral cancer by not smoking or using spit tobacco and by limiting your alcohol intake. When tobacco use and alcohol use are combined, the risk of oral cancer increases 15 times more than with non-users of tobacco and alcohol products. Research suggests that eating plenty of fruits and vegetables may safeguard against oral cancer.

Because successful treatment and rehabilitation are dependent on early detection, it is extremely important to see your dentist for an oral cancer screening and regular checkup at least every six months. Survival rates greatly increase the earlier oral cancer is discovered and treated. During your next dental visit, ask your dentist to do an oral cancer screening.

Also, periodic self-examinations can increase your chances of detecting oral cancer, so be sure to examine your face, cheeks, jaw and neck regularly for any changes or lumps.

## What do dentists recommend to help stop smoking?

Your dentist can recommend a step-by-step program tailored to your needs or prescribe a nicotine patch in combination with a cessation program. Call your dentist for the options suited to your dependency. Your dentist will work with you and your physician to determine your needs.

*Information courtesy of the Academy of General Dentistry*