

Oral cancer

How to protect yourself

While the rates of oral cancer have dropped in the last 20 years, health agencies still anticipate that it will be diagnosed in more than 30,000 Americans this year. Of those 30,000, two-thirds are men. Knowing the risk factors as well as the signs of oral cancer can go a long way toward limiting the influence this disease can have on your life.

KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR

As with many forms of cancer, early detection of oral cancerous lesions can improve the chances of successful treatment.

You can take an active role in detecting signs of oral cancer early by checking your oral tissues periodically. Take a few minutes to examine your lips, gums, cheek lining and tongue, as well as the floor and roof of your mouth. You'll want to note any of the following:

- a color change in the oral tissues (whitish or red spots, for example);
- a lump, thickening, rough spot, crust or small eroded area;
- a sore that bleeds easily or does not heal;
- pain, tenderness or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips;
- difficulty in chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw or tongue;
- changes in the voice;
- a change in the way your teeth fit together.

In addition, watch for changes beyond the mouth that could signal oral cancer:

- drastic weight loss;
- a lump or mass in your neck.

If any of these conditions persists, contact your dentist for an examination.

MINIMIZE THE RISK

You can take steps to reduce your risk of developing oral cancer by avoiding behaviors that researchers have identified as being strongly associated with the development of oral cancer.



Oral cancer—tongue

Use of any kind of tobacco product (cigarettes, pipe tobacco, cigars or smokeless varieties such as snuff and chewing tobacco), particularly when combined with heavy alcohol consumption, has been identified as the major risk factor for oral cancers in the United States. While this combination poses the primary risk in the development of oral cancer, chemicals associated with cancer have been detected in all forms of tobacco.

As with some forms of skin cancer, prolonged, repeated exposure to the sun may increase the risk of cancer on the lip, especially the lower lip. Try to stay out of the sun as much as possible. If your profession or your leisure activities require that you spend extended periods outdoors, take precautions to minimize the effects the sun might have on your lips.

Other possible risk factors in the development of oral cancer include genetics, liver function and certain medications. Diet, too, may play a role; some studies suggest that a diet low in fresh fruits and vegetables can increase your overall risk of developing cancer.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DENTAL CARE

Regular visits to your dentist are important in protecting yourself from the effects of oral cancer. As part of your regular dental examination, your dentist can quickly and easily check the oral tissues for signs of cancerous and precancerous lesions.

Detecting and treating cancerous tissues as early as possible is critical in helping you beat a potentially deadly disease.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

There is a wealth of information regarding dental care at your fingertips.

Just go to the American Dental Association's Web site ("www.ada.org") and click on the Patients and Consumers content area for more discussion about dental hygiene, oral health or the ADA National Oral Cancer Awareness Campaign. ■



Oral cancer—lip

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