

Oral Cancer

Causes and Symptoms & The Oral Cancer Exam

What is oral cancer?

The term oral cancer includes cancers of the mouth and the pharynx (the back of the throat).

What puts someone at risk for developing oral cancer?

Tobacco and alcohol use. Most cases of oral cancer are linked to cigarette smoking, heavy alcohol use, or the use of both tobacco and alcohol together. *Using tobacco plus alcohol poses a much greater risk than using either substance alone.*

HPV. Infection with the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus (specifically the HPV 16 type) has been linked to a subset of oral cancers.

Age. Risk increases with age. Oral cancer most often occurs in people over the age of 40.

Sun exposure. Cancer of the lip can be caused by sun exposure.

Diet. A diet low in fruits and vegetables may play a role in oral cancer development.

What are the possible signs and symptoms of oral cancer?

- A sore, irritation, lump or thick patch in the mouth, lip, or throat
- A white or red patch in the mouth
- A feeling that something is caught in the throat
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Difficulty moving the jaw or tongue
- Numbness in the tongue or other areas of the mouth
- Swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable
- Pain in one ear without hearing loss

A person who has any of these symptoms for more than 2 weeks should see a dentist or doctor for an oral cancer exam. Most often, symptoms like those listed above do not mean cancer. An infection or another problem can cause the same symptoms. *But it's important to have the symptoms checked out—because if it is cancer, it can be treated more successfully if it's caught early.*

What is the oral cancer exam?

An oral cancer examination can detect early signs of cancer. The exam is painless and takes only a few minutes.

During the exam, a dentist or doctor checks the face, neck, lips, tongue, mouth, and the back of the throat for possible signs of cancer.

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Additional Reading

Review articles on oral cancer

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HPV and oral cancer

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