



Oral Cancer Are You At Risk?

It is estimated that more than 35,000 people are diagnosed with oral cancer every year. More than 7,500 will die from it. As part of your routine dental exam, your dentist checks for oral cancer. When caught early, most types of oral cancer have a more than 80 percent five-year survival rate.

Watch for the signs

It's important to watch for warning signs. The most common is a sore in the mouth that bleeds easily and does not heal. If you have a sore that lasts more than two weeks, have it checked. And also watch for:

- Changes in tissue color in the mouth
- Mouth pain or tenderness
- A lump or thickened area
- Difficulty chewing, speaking, swallowing or moving the jaw
- A change in the way the teeth fit together

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What Are The Risk Factors?

- **Tobacco/Alcohol Use.** About nine out of 10 people with oral cancer use tobacco. The combination of frequent alcohol consumption with cigarettes, cigars, pipes and smokeless tobacco increases the risk of oral cancer.
- **Age.** People older than 40 are at higher risk for oral cancer.
- **Gender.** Men are about twice as likely to get oral cancer as women.
- **Race.** African American men are more likely to get oral cancer and nearly twice as likely to die from it.
- **Prolonged exposure to sunlight.** More than 30 percent of patients with cancer of the lip have outdoor jobs.
- **Diet.** A diet low in fruits and vegetables is linked with increased risk of oral cancer.

Recent studies also point to a connection between a strain of the human papilloma virus (HPV), which causes cervical cancer, and oral cancer.

What Can You Do?

While there are factors such as race, age and gender that you can't control, you lessen your chances of getting oral cancer if you avoid any kind of tobacco use and limit alcohol consumption. Eat a nutritious diet and use lip balm with sunscreen when you'll be outdoors for extended periods.

Visit your dentist regularly. Doctors and dentists can detect the early stages of oral cancer, when it's most treatable. At each routine dental exam, dentists will examine your mouth for cancerous or precancerous signs.

There is a simple test, covered by most benefit plans, called a brush biopsy. This typically painless procedure catches cells from a suspicious area. The cells are then sent for analysis, the results of which will determine your treatment plan.

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Sources: American Cancer Society; Oral Cancer Foundation; American Dental Association.

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