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Oral Cancer

Overview

Oral cancer includes cancers of the mouth and the back of the throat. Oral cancers develop on the tongue, the tissue lining the mouth and gums, under the tongue, at the base of the tongue, and the area of the throat at the back of the mouth.

Oral cancer accounts for roughly three percent of all cancers diagnosed annually in the United States, or about 49,700 new cases each year.

Oral cancer most often occurs in people over the age of 40 and affects more than twice as many men as women. Most oral cancers are related to tobacco use, alcohol use (or both), or infection by the human papilloma virus (HPV).

Causes

Tobacco and alcohol use. Tobacco use of any kind, including cigarette smoking, puts you at risk for developing oral cancers. Heavy alcohol use also increases the risk. Using both tobacco and alcohol increases the risk even further.

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

Age. Risk increases with age. Oral cancers most often occur 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.

Symptoms

If you have any of these symptoms for more than two weeks, see a dentist or a doctor.

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

Diagnosis

Because oral cancer can spread quickly, early detection is important. An oral cancer examination can detect early signs of cancer. The exam is painless and takes only a few minutes. Many dentists will perform the test during your regular dental check-up.

During the exam, your dentist or dental hygienist will check your face, neck, lips, and entire mouth for possible signs of cancer.

Treatment

When oral cancer is detected early, it is treated with surgery or radiation therapy. Oral cancer that is further along when it is diagnosed may use a combination of treatments.

For example, radiation therapy and chemotherapy are often given at the same time. Another treatment option is targeted therapy, which is a newer type of cancer treatment that uses drugs or other substances to precisely identify and attack cancer cells. The choice of treatment depends on your general health, where in your mouth or throat the cancer began, the size and type of the tumor, and whether the cancer has spread.

Your doctor may refer you to a specialist. Specialists who treat oral cancer include:

- Head and neck surgeons
- Dentists who specialize in surgery of the mouth, face, and jaw (oral and maxillofacial surgeons)
- Ear, nose, and throat doctors (otolaryngologists)
- Doctors who specifically treat cancer (medical and radiation oncologists)

Other health care professionals who may be part of a treatment team include dentists, plastic surgeons, reconstructive surgeons, speech pathologists, oncology nurses, registered dietitians, and mental health counselors.

Helpful Tips

Oral cancer and its treatment can cause dental problems. It's important that your mouth is in good health before cancer treatment begins.

- See a dentist for a thorough exam one month, if possible, before starting cancer treatment to give your mouth time to heal after any dental work you might need.
- Before, during, and after cancer treatment, ask your health care provider for ways to control pain and other symptoms, and to relieve the side effects of therapy.
- Talk to your health care team about financial aid, transportation, home care, emotional, and social support for yourself and your family.

Additional Resources

- [Head and Neck Cancers: Questions and Answers](#)
A fact sheet from the NIH's National Cancer Institute that answers questions about cancers of the mouth (oral cavity), salivary glands, sinuses, throat (pharynx), and voice box (larynx).
- [The National Cancer Institute Contact Center](#)
To find out about helpful programs, services, and publications, call information specialists at the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) information clearinghouse.
- [NCI Head and Neck Cancer Home Page — Patient Version](#)
The NIH National Cancer Institute's gateway for information about head and neck cancers.
- [Radiation Therapy and You: Support for People with Cancer](#)
A booklet from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) for people who are about to receive or are now receiving radiation therapy for cancer.
- [MedlinePlus: Oral Cancer](#)
The NIH National Library of Medicine's collection of links to government, professional and non-profit/voluntary organizations with information on oral cancer.
- [The Oral Cancer Foundation](#)

- [Support for People with Oral and Head and Neck Cancer, Inc.](#)

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