

What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer is the abnormal growth of cells in the oral cavity. This may include the lips, tongue, mouth and throat. There are two types of oral cancer: the type that develops in the mouth, called oral cavity cancer; and the type that develops in the back of the mouth at the top of the throat in an area referred to as the oropharynx, called oropharyngeal cancer.

How common is oral cancer?

According to the American Cancer Society, oral cancer affects more than 35,000 people in the U.S. each year.¹

What are the risk factors for oral cancer?

Tobacco use, such as cigarettes, cigars or chewing tobacco, and heavy drinking are the most significant risk factors for developing oral cancer.^{1,2} Prior occurrence, family history of oral cancer and being over the age of 40 also increase your risk for developing oral cancer.^{1,2} Infection with the human papillomavirus, the virus responsible for cervical cancer in women known as HPV, may also increase a person's risk for oral cancer.³ Twenty five percent of oral cancer patients have no risk factors for oral cancer.⁴

What is the survival rate of oral cancer?

Although other cancers present more frequently than oral cancer, the survival rate for this disease is discouraging; it causes 7,500 deaths each year and only slightly more than half of oral cancer patients survive five years.¹

What are the treatment options for oral cancer?

Early detection can significantly change what treatment options a doctor may decide to pursue. Treatment for early-stage oral cancer usually involves a surgical resection of the diseased tissue. If the cancerous tissue is large, surgery to remove the diseased tissue may involve removing a large portion of the tongue, lower jaw or throat. When the disease metastasizes, or spreads, to other areas of the body, your doctor may require chemotherapy or radiation in addition to surgical removal of the diseased tissue.

What can people do to reduce their risk of developing oral cancer?

The single most important way to reduce the risk of developing oral cancer is to reduce the risk factors, stop using tobacco and evaluate drinking habits. If a person uses tobacco or is a heavy drinker and is over the age of 40 their dentist should evaluate the oral cavity annually with a visual examination, including the use of an adjunctive screening device to increase the visibility of potentially cancerous tissue. If a person has one of the additional risk factors for oral cancer, they should speak with their dentist about concerns for developing oral cancer.



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- SEER data and the Oral Cancer Foundation report that approximately 100 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with oral cancer every day.^{5,6}
- Seventy percent of oral cancer cases are diagnosed at a late stage, which partially accounts for the poor five-year survival rate of approximately 60 percent.¹
- In the U.S., oral cancer accounts for approximately three percent of all cancers but survival rates are among the lowest of major cancers.⁷
- Oral cancer is twice as prevalent in men as it is in women.²
- The American Dental Association reports that up to 25% of cases occur in people who don't smoke and have no other risk factors.⁴
- One study showed a 35% reduction in oral cancer mortality when the disease is detected early.⁸
- The five-year survival rate for patients who have localized disease at diagnosis is 82% compared with only 28% for patients whose disease has metastasized.^{1,11}
- Research from Johns Hopkins Hospital and other institutions suggests that the human papillomavirus (HPV), best known as the primary cause of cervical cancer, may also cause certain types of oral cancer.³
- Ninety-five percent of oral cancers occur in patients 40 and older, with those at highest risk being smokers and chronic alcohol consumers age 65 and older.
- People 65 and older with lifestyle risk factors have the highest risk to develop oral cancer.^{9,10}

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