

# What you should know about oral cancer



**D**etecting oral cancer early can nearly double your chance of survival.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is important that you know what factors put you at risk of developing the disease and what symptoms to watch for. Approximately 3% of all cancers diagnosed in 2015 involved the mouth or the back of the throat. When certain types of skin cancer were excluded, these oral cancers accounted for most head and neck cancers.<sup>1</sup>

## RISK FACTORS

Some risk factors for developing oral cancer are beyond your control. Men tend to be at greater risk than women for oral cancer, which is diagnosed most often in adults between the ages of 55 and 64 years.<sup>2</sup> However, you can control other risk factors. For example, some behaviors that may put you at risk include

- using tobacco products;
- drinking alcohol heavily (more than 4 drinks a day)<sup>3</sup>;
- using alcohol and tobacco products together (significantly increases the risk);
- using betel quid (paan)<sup>4</sup>;
- eating a diet low in fruits and vegetables;
- spending long periods in the sun, which is associated with lip cancer.<sup>5</sup>

Another risk factor on the rise is infection with the human papilloma virus (HPV), which is sexually transmitted. Specifically, HPV is linked to cancers classified as *oropharyngeal*. Oropharyngeal cancer involves tissues near the back of the mouth and throat, including the back and base of the tongue, and the tonsils.<sup>3</sup> People who have HPV-related oropharyngeal cancer tend to be 4 to 10 years younger than people with oral cancers that are not related to HPV.<sup>6</sup>

## ORAL CANCER SIGNS

Some signs you can watch for include

- a sore on the lips or in the mouth that will not heal;
- red or white patches in the mouth;
- pain, tenderness, or numbness on the lips or in the mouth;
- a lump, thickening, a rough spot, crusty area, or eroded area on the lips or in the mouth;
- difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or tongue;
- a change in the way your teeth fit together when you close your mouth;

- a lump or growth in your throat or neck;
- cough or sore throat that will not go away;
- earache;
- trouble swallowing;
- hoarseness or other changes in your voice.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Self-examinations, healthy lifestyle choices, and regular dental visits can go a long way toward catching oral cancer early, making the disease easier to treat. Commit to taking these steps in your life:

- Check your mouth and neck regularly for any of the above symptoms, and tell your dentist if you notice any of these or other changes;
- Avoid using tobacco or drinking heavily;
- Eat a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables;
- Avoid spending extended periods in the sun and use sunscreen;
- If you are sexually active, practice safe sex<sup>7</sup>;
- See your dentist—as part of your dental visit, he or she will examine your mouth and neck for signs of oral cancer. ■

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