

Preventing oral cancer: Signs, symptoms and preventive care for all ages

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When it comes to oral health, most of us are focused on avoiding cavities or banishing bad breath. We don't really think about taking steps to prevent oral cancers.

But according to Samer Al-Khudari, MD, we should. "Unfortunately, there is relatively low awareness about these cancers—including how to prevent and recognize them," says Al-Khudari, a head and neck surgeon at Rush University Medical Center.

Cancers of the oral cavity (including the lips, cheeks and tongue) and the oropharynx (including the soft palate, tonsils and throat) can crop up in a variety of ways and are not always easy to spot. "Symptoms vary by the type of [cancer](#)," Al-Khudari explains. "Not all patients have pain or irritation. Sometimes the symptoms are barely noticeable in the early stages."

That's a big reason why these cancers often go undiagnosed until the later stages, after they have spread to the lymph nodes.

What you need to know about oral cancer

Here are a few other important things to know about oral cavity cancer and oropharyngeal cancer:

- In general, men are twice as likely to be diagnosed with these cancers as women.
- The number of patients under 50 years old has been steadily increasing; and sometimes, these cancers occur in young adults in their 20s and 30s.
- Patients who survive a first encounter with the disease have a higher risk of developing a second, related cancer. That increased risk can last for five to 10 years.
- Biopsy is the only way to properly diagnose oral and oropharyngeal tumors and lesions.
- Although these various types of cancers can be found in one small area of the body, each type has different causes and treatments.
- Patients on immunosuppression medications—typically those who had an organ transplant—have an increased risk of head and neck cancer.

Keeping your mouth and throat healthy

The good news is that even at the later stages, these cancers are still very treatable.

With current treatment advances, survival rates for oral cancers have improved over even a decade ago. In fact, some oropharynx cancers have been found to have survival rates of 80 to 90 percent at three years.

And many oral cavity and oropharyngeal cancers can be prevented altogether with sensible self-care and healthy lifestyle choices.

Here, Al-Khudari offers five preventive tips:

1. Steer clear of tobacco

The longer you've used tobacco and the more often you use it, the greater your risk of head and neck cancers.

Human papillomavirus (HPV), particularly HPV16, is strongly associated with oropharyngeal cancers, especially those at the back of the mouth.

"Both smoking and [smokeless tobacco](#) always play a direct role in causing these cancers," Al-Khudari says.

"Typically, HPV-related cancers are found in men in their late 40s or early 50s," Al-Khudari says. "They tend to have minimal symptoms, like a swelling in their neck that they discover while shaving that doesn't go away."

Chewing, smokeless and snuff tobaccos, which are placed directly in the [mouth](#), can create gray-white ulcers called leukoplakia in the mouth that can become cancerous. Smokeless tobacco also contains chemicals known to damage a gene that protects against cancer.

The best way to prevent HPV is to get vaccinated before you become sexually active. With vaccines now available that protect against two strains of HPV—recommended for 11- to 26-year-olds—there is hope that the number of cases of these cancers will decrease over time as more people are vaccinated.

2. Drink alcohol in moderation

As with smoking, the longer you use alcohol and the amount you drink, the more your risk goes up. That's because alcohol plays a role in changing the body's chemistry to break down its defenses against cancer.

And because you can get HPV from a single sexual encounter, Al-Khudari also recommends practicing safe sex.

People who have more than 3.5 alcoholic drinks per day increase their risk of oral cavity cancers two to three times, according to the National Institutes of Health. "You should definitely avoid excessive drinking," Al-Khudari affirms. "Alcohol dependence and binge drinking increase a person's risk. And [excessive drinking](#) and smoking combined has a multiplying effect."

5. Shield your lips from the sun

Lip cancer is directly related to ultraviolet radiation from sunlight, and people who work outdoors and have prolonged exposure to the sun are more likely to develop lip cancer.

3. See your dentist regularly

Very often, dentists and dental hygienists are the first to notice potentially cancerous growths.

"Typically, they catch things really early during routine dental exams," Al-Khudari says. "They can then refer you to an ear, nose and throat specialist or a head and neck surgeon like myself. If we can confirm the diagnosis and start treatment right away, there's a good chance we can eliminate the cancer."

If you have a history of severe sunburns, take extra care with your lips. Just as skin can burn easily, the lips are also sensitive to the sun," Al-Khudari says.

In addition to visiting the dentist every six months, be sure to brush and floss twice a day—and after meals—to keep your teeth and mouth healthy.

4. Get vaccinated for HPV

In addition to limiting sun exposure during the peak hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., always wear a protective lip balm with SPF when you're outside, and reapply it after you eat or drink, or whenever you reapply sunscreen. Also, wear hats that shield your face from the sun.

Symptoms of oral cancer

In general, warning signs of mouth and throat cancers include the following:

- Sores in the mouth that don't heal
- Bleeding in the mouth that lasts more than a week
- Slow-growing lumps in the mouth or neck

- Pain in your mouth lasting more than two weeks
- Dramatic voice changes, especially in smokers
- Persistent earaches in both ears
- Numbness of the lower lip and chin

If you experience any of these symptoms, Al-Khudari says, visit your primary care doctor as soon as possible. "If it is cancer, the earlier it's diagnosed, the better the chance we can successfully treat it."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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