
INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Mouth Cancer

Introduction

Mouth cancer can develop in any part of the mouth – this includes the tongue, gums, tonsils, lining of the cheeks, lips and the upper part of the throat. Early signs of mouth cancer can often be seen. If mouth cancer is detected early, there is a better chance of surviving it.

What should I look out for?

Look out for the following changes and see your dentist or doctor if they last longer than three weeks.

- an ulcer or sore in your mouth or on your tongue
- persistent discomfort or pain in the mouth
- a red or white patch in your mouth
- an unexplained lump in your neck
- a sore or painful throat
- a croaky voice or difficulty swallowing

Mouth ulcers and swellings are very common and usually get better on their own. Although it still probably won't be mouth cancer, changes that last longer than three weeks could be serious and you should see your dentist or doctor as soon as possible.

You should check your mouth regularly in front of the mirror. Your dentist is specially trained to look for signs of mouth cancer and can check the areas that aren't easy for you to see. A mouth cancer check is part of every dental check up. You should attend regularly – depending on your oral health this could be every 3 months or up to 24 months for adults.

If your dentist notices anything unusual they will refer you to hospital for further tests.

How is mouth cancer diagnosed?

Mouth cancer testing is normally done in hospital by specialists. It is common to carry out a test called a biopsy. This is where a small piece of tissue is removed and examined under a microscope to see if there are any cancerous cells present. The biopsy is normally done with a local anaesthetic (numbing injection) into the area around the suspicious area.

How is mouth cancer treated?

This depends on how early the cancer is found, what type of cancer it is and where it is in the mouth. Treatment usually involves surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy or a combination of all three.

How can I reduce my risk of mouth cancer?

Be a non-smoker

- Smoking cigarettes, cigars or pipes all increase the risk of mouth cancer. Smokers are more than three times more likely to develop mouth cancer than non-smokers. Although e-cigarettes may be safer than tobacco, we still don't know that regular use is completely safe.

Avoid chewing tobacco or betel nut

- People who chew tobacco or betel nut (areca nut found in gutkha, betel quid or paan) are at higher risk of developing mouth cancer. If you smoke or chew tobacco or betel nut, the best thing is to stop completely. Help is available from your doctor, NHS Smokefree on 0800 022 4332 or Asian Quitline on 0800 002288.

Cut down on alcohol

- The more you cut down on alcohol, the more you reduce the risk of mouth cancer. People who drink alcohol **and** use tobacco have the highest risk of mouth cancer.

If you'd like some help on cutting down your drinking, see your doctor or visit <http://www.nhs.uk/Change4Life>

Eat a healthy diet and 5-a-day

- Eating plenty of fruit and vegetables may help to reduce the risk of mouth cancer. Try to eat a least five portions every day.

Practice safer oral sex

- An increasing number of oral cancers are caused by certain strains of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) HPV is the virus that causes genital warts. HPV is sexually transmitted so it's likely that oral sex is the primary route. You're more likely to become infected with HPV if you start having sex at a younger age, if you have a lot of sexual partners or having sex without using a barrier method of protection against sexually transmitted infections. Using a condom or dam (a square of very thin soft plastic) during oral sex reduces the risk of getting HPV in the mouth.

What else affects my risk?

Mouth cancer is almost twice as common in men as in women. It's rare in people under 40, but HPV-associated cancers are becoming more common in younger people.

Further information

You can find more information about mouth cancer at <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer-of-the-mouth/pages/introduction.aspx>