

Want Some Life Saving Advice?

Ask Your Dental Hygienist About Oral Cancer

PREVALENCE

This year alone, more than 59,660 Americans will be diagnosed with oral cavity and oropharyngeal cancer and over 12,770 will die of this disease.¹ The five-year survival rate is only about 69%. Many who do survive, experience problems such as facial disfigurement or eating and speaking difficulties.

The statistics related to oral and oropharyngeal cancer remain high because these cancers are often discovered at a later stage. When they are detected early, treatment and treatment related problems are more easily managed and reduced. You can help by knowing the risk factors and warning signs of oral cancer and seeking evaluation by your oral health professionals.

RISK FACTORS

- Any form of tobacco use
- Alcohol consumption
- 30-fold increased risk for individuals who both smoke and drink heavily
- HPV infection of the mouth and throat, believed to be transmitted through sexual contact

WARNING SIGNS

- A lip or mouth with ulcer/sore that doesn't heal or lasts more than 3 weeks
- A white or red patch on the inside of your mouth
- Loose teeth
- A growth or lump inside your mouth
- Mouth pain
- Ear pain
- Difficult or painful swallowing
- Chronic sore throat
- A lump in your neck or throat
- Losing weight without trying
- Difficulty speaking

EARLY DETECTION IS KEY

In its early stages, depending on the location, oral cancer can be treated in up to 90% of cases. However, if the cancer goes undetected, it can spread to other parts of the body and become more difficult to treat.

If you have never had an oral cancer examination, there is no better time to schedule one than during Oral Cancer Awareness Month in April. Be sure to ask that this comprehensive examination be made part of all your future dental hygiene and dental appointments.

¹Siegel RL, Kratzer TB, Giaquinto AN, et al. *Cancer statistics, 2025*. CA Cancer J Clin. 2025;10-45

GUIDE TO ORAL CANCER SELF-EXAM

Perform this 7-step oral cancer self-exam once a month. At each step, look for anything unusual, especially any lumps, red or white patches, changes in color/texture or lingering ulcers. Remove dentures or any removable appliances prior to self-exam.

You will need a mirror, a good light source, and clean fingers. A piece of gauze may be used to effectively examine the tongue. A small package of 2X2 gauze is available at most drug stores.

Step 1: Face

Look at your entire face for swellings you have not noticed before and inspect your skin.

Step 2: Neck

Run your fingers under your jaw and feel along the large muscle on either side of your neck. Are there any swellings? Does everything feel the same on both sides? Feel for anything that's firm, that doesn't move about easily when pushed on, enlarged, and it is often painless.

Step 3: Lips

Pull your upper lip upwards and bottom lip downwards. Look inside for sores or changes in color.

Step 4: Gums

Use your thumb and forefinger to examine your gums.

Step 5: Cheeks

Open your mouth and pull your cheek out, one side at a time, with your finger. Look for any red or white patches. Check for ulcers, lumps, or tenderness.

Step 6: Tongue

Gently pull out your tongue and look at one side first and then the other. Look under your tongue by lifting the tip of your tongue to the roof of your mouth. Look for any swelling, ulcers, or change in color.

Step 7: Floor and Roof of Mouth

Tilt back your head and open your mouth wide to inspect the roof of your mouth. Lift your tongue up and look underneath at the floor of your mouth. Gently press your finger along the floor of your mouth and under your tongue. Observe changes in color, lumps, swellings, or ulcers.

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