

MOUTH CANCER FACTS

Mouth cancer can develop in any part of the mouth including the tongue, gums, tonsils, lining of the mouth, lips and upper part of the throat. The early signs of mouth cancer can often be seen. When changes are found early there is a very good chance of a cure.

Who is most at risk?

Our lifestyle choices have a big effect on our risk of mouth cancer:

The most important causes of mouth cancer are:

Smoking tobacco (cigarettes, cigars, pipes)
Regularly drinking large amounts of alcohol
Chewing tobacco or betel nut

People who use tobacco and drink too much alcohol have the highest risk of mouth cancer. Up to three-quarters of mouth cancers are caused this way.

Mouth cancer is more common in men than women and is rare in people under 40.

Early detection saves lives

It is important to notice changes inside your mouth. Tell your doctor or dentist if they last longer than three weeks. Early treatment is simpler and more effective and many people can be cured.

What should I look out for?

Look out for the following changes. They may not be painful but you should still see your doctor or dentist if they last longer than three weeks.

The most common signs of mouth cancer are...

An ulcer or sore in your mouth or on your tongue
A red or white patch in your mouth
An unexplained pain in your mouth or ear

Other signs to look out for are...

An unexplained lump in your neck
A sore or painful throat
A croaky voice or difficulty swallowing

Checking your mouth

Sometimes the early signs of mouth cancer do not cause pain or discomfort but they can be seen. So it is important to check your mouth for any of the changes. From time to time, spend a few moments in front of the mirror looking in your mouth. Check your tongue, gums, lining of your cheeks, lips, under your tongue and the roof of your mouth. But remember your dentist can easily check the parts you cannot see.

Your dentist can help

Dentists have special training to help them identify health problems and are often the first to spot early changes in their patients. As part of a regular examination, dentists check for the early warning signs of mouth cancer. They will refer patients with suspect changes to hospital for further tests.

If you are over 40, smoke, chew tobacco or betel nut or drink heavily, ask your dentist to check your mouth once a year. It is important to visit the dentist regularly even if you no longer have your own teeth.