

Oral Cancer

Did you know almost 42,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral and throat cancers this year? And that the 5-year survival rate of those diagnosed is only slightly more than 64 percent? When cancer is detected and treated early, treatment-related health problems are reduced.

The oral cavity includes your lips, cheek lining, gums, front part of your tongue, floor of the mouth beneath the tongue and the hard palate that makes up the roof of your mouth. The throat (pharynx) starts at the soft part of the roof of your mouth and continues back into your throat. It includes the back section of your tongue as well as the base where the tongue attaches to the floor of your mouth.

During your dental visit, your dentist can talk to you about your health history and examine these areas for signs of mouth and/or throat cancer. The screening will consist of a visual inspection of the mouth and palpation of the jaw and neck. Regular visits to your dentist can improve the chances that any suspicious changes in your oral health will be caught early, at a time when cancer can be treated more easily. In between visits, it's important to be aware of the following signs and symptoms and to see your dentist if they do not disappear after two weeks.

The symptoms of mouth or throat cancer can include:

- a sore or irritation that doesn't go away
- red or white patches
- pain, tenderness or numbness in mouth or lips
- a lump, thickening, rough spot, crust or small eroded area
- difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving your tongue or jaw
- a change in the way your teeth fit together when you close your mouth

Research has identified a number of factors that contribute to the development of mouth and throat cancers. Smokers and excessive alcohol drinkers older than 50 are the most at risk. More recently, the human papilloma virus (HPV), which is sexually transmitted, has been associated with cancers of the oropharyngeal region that is the part of the throat at the back of the mouth. HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancers are related to the increasing incidence of throat cancers in non-smoking adults.

HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancers typically develop in the throat at the base of the tongue and near or on the tonsils making them difficult to detect. Although HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancers are often diagnosed at a later stage, people with HPV-positive cancers have a lower risk of dying or having recurrence than those with HPV-negative cancers. It is likely that there is a complex interaction of many external and internal factors that play a role in the development of HPV-positive cancers.

(Source: <http://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/az-topics/o/oral-cancer>)