

Mouth (oral) cancer

What is mouth cancer?

Most people have heard of cancer affecting parts of the body such as the lungs or breasts. However, cancer can occur in the mouth, where the disease can affect the lips, tongue, cheeks and throat.

Who can be affected by mouth cancer?

Anyone can be affected by mouth cancer, whether they have their own teeth or not. Mouth cancers are more common in people over 40, particularly men. However, research has shown that mouth cancer is becoming more common in younger patients and in women. There are, on average, almost 6000 new cases of mouth cancer diagnosed in the UK each year. The number of new cases of mouth cancer is on the increase.

Do people die from mouth cancer?

Yes. Over 1,800 people in the UK die from mouth cancer every year. Many of these deaths could be prevented if the cancer was caught early enough. As it is, people with mouth cancer are more likely to die than those having cervical cancer or melanoma skin cancer.

What can cause mouth cancer?

Most cases of mouth cancer are linked to tobacco and alcohol. Cigarette, cigar and pipe [smoking](#) are the main forms of tobacco use in the UK. However, the traditional ethnic habits of chewing tobacco, betel quid, gutkha and paan are particularly dangerous.

Alcohol increases the risk of mouth cancer, and if tobacco and alcohol are consumed together the risk is even greater. Over-exposure to sunlight can also increase the risk of cancer of the lips.

Many recent reports have linked mouth cancer to the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is the major cause of cervical cancer and affects the skin that lines the moist areas of the body.

HPV can be spread through oral sex, and research now suggests that it could soon rival smoking and drinking as one of the main causes of mouth cancer.

Practicing safe sex and limiting the number of partners you have may help reduce your chances of contracting HPV.

What are the signs of mouth cancer?

Mouth cancer can appear in different forms and can affect all parts of the mouth, tongue and lips. Mouth cancer can appear as a painless [mouth ulcer](#) that does not heal normally. A white or red patch in the mouth can also develop into a cancer. It is important to visit your dentist if these areas do not heal within three weeks.

How can mouth cancer be detected early?

Mouth cancer can often be spotted in its early stages by your dentist during a thorough mouth examination. If mouth cancer is recognised early, then the chances of a cure are good. Many people with mouth cancer go to their dentist or doctor too late.

What is involved in a full check-up of the mouth?

The dentist examines the inside of your mouth and your tongue with the help of a small mirror. Remember, your [dentist](#) is able to see parts of your mouth that you cannot see easily yourself.

What happens if my dentist finds a problem?

If your dentist finds something unusual or abnormal they will refer you to a consultant at the local hospital, who will carry out a thorough examination of your mouth and throat. A small sample of the cells may be gathered from the area (a biopsy), and these cells will be examined under the microscope to see what is

wrong.

What happens next?

If the cells are cancerous, more tests will be carried out. These may include overall health checks, blood tests, [x-rays](#) or scans. These tests will decide what course of treatment is needed.

Can mouth cancer be cured?

If mouth cancer is spotted early, the chances of a complete cure are good, and the smaller the area or ulcer the better the chance of a cure. However, too many people come forward too late, because they do not visit their dentist for regular examinations.

How can I make sure that my mouth stays healthy?

Most cases of [mouth cancer](#) are linked to tobacco and alcohol. Cigarette, cigar and pipe smoking are the main forms of tobacco use in the UK. However, the traditional ethnic habits of chewing tobacco, betel quid, gutkha and paan are particularly dangerous.

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