



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL  
ASSOCIATION

## Oral Cancer

# How you're increasing your risk

Oral Cancer is a potentially fatal disease that can affect anyone from young adults right through to the elderly. It is caused by a variety of lifestyle risks, many of which are a part of the lives of the majority of Australians. Although it may only occur in relatively small numbers, the number of cases is on the rise, making it a disease that should be taken very seriously. It is an insidious, aggressive disease with a survival rate of only 50% over 5 years and it often goes undetected until it is at an advanced stage.

### The warning signs

Oral cancer can occur on the lips, tongue, cheeks, floor of the mouth, gums, back of the throat or in salivary glands. The signs and symptoms include:

- A sore, irritation, lump or thick patch in the mouth, lip, or throat
- A chronic ulcer or blood blister in the mouth that does not heal
- A white or red patch in the mouth
- A feeling that something is caught in the throat
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Difficulty moving the jaw or tongue
- Prolonged swollen glands
- A sore throat that does not go away
- Difficulty speaking, or a change in the voice
- Numbness in the tongue or other areas of the mouth
- Swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable

If after reading about these symptoms you feel that one or more may apply to you, don't panic. There can be a number of reasons other than oral cancer for their occurrence. Even so, it's best to book an appointment with your dentist. Make sure you are upfront about your concerns and request an oral cancer screening.

### Lifestyle factors that increase risk of Oral Cancer

#### Smoking and Tobacco

It should come as no surprise to discover that tobacco increases your risk of oral cancer. This does not just mean cigarette smoking: chewing tobacco and betel nut, cigars, marijuana or any other inhalation where you burn the throat increases your risk of oral cancer. Beyond oral cancer there are a number of other health risks associated with these activities, so quitting is the best course of action. Next time you're at the dentist, ask about the impact smoking or use of tobacco products has on your oral health and what the best strategy would be to help you quit.

#### Alcohol

Drinking alcohol is an acceptable social behaviour among adults but in excess it can have a number of adverse effects, including increasing your risk of oral cancer. The Australian Guidelines for alcohol intake (available at [www.alcohol.gov.au](http://www.alcohol.gov.au)) recommends no more than two standard drinks per day to reduce your risk of alcohol related diseases and injury. The use of alcohol and tobacco together exponentially increases the risk of oral cancer.

#### Oral Sex

Exposure to, and transmission of, the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) through oral sex increases the risk of oral cancer, particularly oropharyngeal cancer (throat cancer). HPV can affect both males and females and the number of HPV-related cases of oral cancer is increasing in Australia, especially in younger males. A vaccination against HPV is available for both males and females in the form of Gardasil and Cervarix. Contact your GP, local immunisation provider or visit [www.hpvvaccine.org.au](http://www.hpvvaccine.org.au) for more information.

However, vaccination does not eliminate the chance of transmission so lifestyle choices such as the use of condoms will help further reduce your risk. Participating in oral sex always carries the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and HPV.

#### Sun Exposure

The skin on your lips is delicate and easily damaged by sun exposure. Don't forget to protect your lips when you go out in the sun by applying a minimum of SPF15+ lip balm. Cut out those harmful UV rays with a hat and sunscreen. If you work outdoors, remember to apply broad-spectrum sunscreen to your lips throughout the day to keep them protected. For more information on how to reduce your risk visit the Cancer Council Australia Website [www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)

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For more information on oral health visit [ada.org.au](http://ada.org.au)

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### Poor Diet

Not having a healthy and nutritious diet increases the risk of oral cancer by depriving your body of antioxidants and essential vitamins and minerals. This doesn't just mean cutting out 'junk foods' but ensuring you drink plenty of water and have a balanced diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables. Consult your general practitioner or dentist for dietary advice.

### Oral hygiene

There is building evidence that poor oral hygiene and chronic irritation of soft tissues from badly broken down teeth increases the risk of oral cancer particularly of the side of the tongue and cheeks. It is advisable that you undertake regular oral hygiene with fluoride toothpaste and visit your dentist twice yearly for regular examination and dental cleaning. Any rough edges should be polished, and broken down teeth should be restored. Rinsing with high alcohol containing mouthwashes is not indicated as it has not been shown to significantly improve oral hygiene, and there is building evidence that it increases the risk of oral cancer particularly in smokers.

### Detecting Oral Cancer

If you develop oral cancer or precancerous lesions, early detection and intervention is extremely important. Your daily hygiene ritual is the perfect opportunity to keep your teeth and gums healthy and monitor your oral health, but there is no substitute for professional advice. Make sure you book in for regular check-ups (at least annually). Your dentist should be looking for soft-tissue changes that are indicative of oral cancer or precancer while performing your normal examination but don't be afraid to ask for an oral cancer screening! If you do not have teeth or you wear dentures, you should still visit a dentist annually for soft-tissue and gum screening.

Dentists have access to new technology which increases the likelihood of detecting oral cancer and precancerous changes early, and these techniques are included as part of a comprehensive oral cancer screening.

### STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO REDUCE YOUR RISK

You can reduce your risk of oral cancer by making the following changes to your lifestyle:

- Eat fresh fruits and vegetables every day
- Limit your alcohol intake
- Avoid prolonged sun exposure
- Quit smoking
- Practice safe sex

For more information on oral health

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