

In 2015, more than 45,000 Americans were diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer. Over 8,000 lost their lives to cancer, killing roughly one person every hour, every day. Of those 45,000 newly diagnosed individuals, only half will be alive in 5 years.

The most common factors that influence oral cancer development are tobacco and alcohol use and through exposure to the human papilloma virus (HPV) – the same virus responsible for the majority of cervical cancers in women.

Oral cancer often starts as a tiny, unnoticed white or red spot or sore somewhere in the mouth and often goes unnoticed until it has metastasized (spread) into another part of the body. It can affect any area of the mouth including the lips, gums, cheek lining, tongue, and the hard or soft palate. Oral cancers have a significantly higher survival rate when detected early. Dental professionals can act as a first line of defense in the early detection of oral cancer. Your CDA member dentist includes oral cancer screening as part of a routine oral exam.

Knowing the early signs can increase survival. Early signs include:

- A sore that bleeds easily or does not heal
- A color change of the oral tissues
- A lump, thickening, rough spot, crust or small eroded area
- Pain, tenderness, or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw or tongue.
- A change in the way the teeth fit together

While oral cancer has been found in individuals with no risk factors, the disease most often occurs in individuals that use tobacco in any form. Alcohol in addition to tobacco increases the risk even more. Historically, oral cancer has been more likely to occur in individuals over 40 years old; however, exposure to HPV has increased its incidence in those younger than this age. If you notice any unusual spots anywhere in your mouth, contact your CDA member dentist immediately for an exam. Be sure to note how long the spot has been there and if it has grown or changed in color or consistency. Remember, early detection is the best strategy for survival.

To learn more about oral cancers and access resources to quit tobacco use, visit: <https://www.cda.org/public-resources/community-oral-health-resources>

