

Oral Cancer

Over 54,000 people in the U.S. were newly diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer in 2022, according to the Oral Cancer Foundation. Over 11,000 lost their lives to cancer, killing more than one person every hour, every day. Of those 54,000 newly diagnosed individuals, only 68% will be alive in five years.

The most common factors that influence oral cancer development are tobacco and alcohol use and exposure to the human papilloma virus (HPV) – the same virus responsible for the majority of cervical cancers in women. HPV infections are three times more common in men than 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 who use tobacco in any form. Alcohol in addition to tobacco increases the risk even more. Historically, oral cancer is more likely to occur in individuals over age 40; however, exposure to HPV has increased the virus's incidence in those younger than 40. The HPV vaccine is 97% effective in preventing cancer and cell changes that could lead to cancer. The recommended age for HPV vaccination is 11-12 but can be given starting at age 9 and approved for people through age 45.

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-oralhealth-resources>

The Oral Cancer Foundation:

<https://oralcancerfoundation.org/dental/>



* Smrithi Chidambaram, Scott A. Hong, Matthew C. Simpson, Nosayaba Osazuwa-Peters, Gregory M. Ward, Sean T. Massa. Temporal trends in oropharyngeal cancer incidence, survival, and cancer-directed surgery among elderly Americans; *Oral Oncology*, Volume 134, 2022, 106132, ISSN 1368-8375.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oraloncology.2022.106132>