

Oral Cancer 101

The eyes may be the windows to the soul, but the mouth has long been recognized as a mirror reflecting the body's health. Here's what you need to know to steer clear of oral cancer.



The Canadian Cancer Society estimated that 4,400 new cases of oral cancer would be diagnosed in Canada in 2015. It also estimated that 1,200 of those diagnosed in 2015 would die from the disease.

According to Health Canada, new oral cancer cases and deaths are relatively low in number compared to prostate, breast and colorectal cancer, but are almost three times higher than for cervical cancer and almost double than that of liver cancer. However, oral cancer can be successfully treated if caught at an early stage.

Your dentist can play an important role in the early detection of oral cancer. Dentistry is about prevention, and the dental exam is the foundation of good oral health. A dentist may notice subtle changes in the mouth that a patient may not.

The oral cancer examination performed by your dentist during a routine dental exam is fast, easy and painless — and it could save your life.

Book your dental exam today!

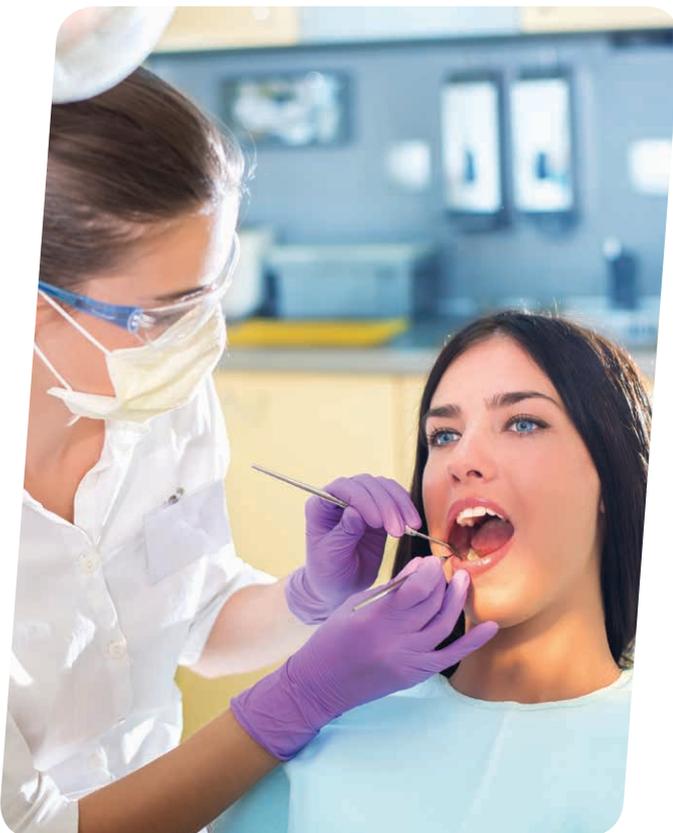
What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer refers to all cancers of the oral cavity, which includes the following:

- lips
- tongue
- teeth
- gums (gingiva)
- lining inside the lips and cheeks (labial mucosa and buccal mucosa)
- floor of the mouth
- roof of the mouth (palate)
- the area behind the wisdom teeth
- salivary gland
- tonsils
- back of the throat

Most oral cancers are located on the sides of the tongue, the floor of the mouth and the lips.

Oral cancer starts in the cells of the mouth. Normally these cells are quite resistant to damage, but repeated injury from smoking, alcohol or even friction may cause sores or painful areas where cancer can start.



Oral Cancer

Symptoms

Oral cancer symptoms include:

- an ulcer or sore on the lip or in the mouth that does not heal
- a lump or growth on the lip or in the mouth or throat, including the tongue
- a white or red patch on the gums, tongue or lining of the mouth
- unusual bleeding, pain or numbness in the mouth
- a sore throat that does not go away, or a feeling that something is caught in the throat
- difficulty or pain with chewing or swallowing
- swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable
- a change in the voice and/or pain in the ear

Your dental exam

Your dentist does more than protect and care for your teeth, gums and smile — your dentist can also help keep you healthy.

As oral health experts, dentists are in a unique position to help in the early detection of many medical conditions, including cancer.

Dentists are trained in medicine, so they recognize the relationship between oral and overall health.

Most people see their dentist regularly, so your dentist is often the first health-care professional to have an opportunity to detect the many health conditions that affect your mouth. Many patients are not aware of the extent that a dental exam can play in disease prevention.

Through the dental exam, your dentist will see if there are any abnormalities or changes in your mouth that might be indications of health problems, such as oral cancer or diabetes. At each visit, your dentist will conduct a medical history review and ask you about your current health.

It's important to answer these questions carefully. What you say can help your dentist alert you to potential health concerns that may require further investigation, diagnosis or treatment by a physician.

Without an examination by a dentist, most early signs of oral cancer are difficult to detect. If you notice a mouth sore or anything out of the ordinary that does not go away or heal after a couple of weeks, discuss it with your dentist.

Known risk factors

- **Smoking and chewing tobacco** — particularly if combined with heavy alcohol consumption
- **Heavy alcohol consumption** — particularly if combined with smoking
- **Excessive sun exposure** — particularly to the lips
- **Age** — people over the age of 40 have a higher risk of developing oral cancer
- **Gender** — men are more susceptible than women to developing oral cancer. In the past, men had a 6:1 ratio of incidence of oral cancer compared to women. However, this ratio is narrowing and is now closer to 2:1.
- **HPV (human papillomavirus)** — infection with HPV-16 increases the risk of oral cancer, and infection with HPV-18 may also increase the risk

Did you know? A diet high in fruits and vegetables may help to lower your chances of oral cancer. Fruits and vegetables have a protective factor that is believed to reduce the risk for oral cancers.

Prevention

- See your dentist for a regular oral exam.
- Quitting (or reducing) your tobacco and alcohol use lowers your risk of developing oral cancer.
- When you are outside and exposed to the sun, use lip balm with UVA and UVB protection and wear a hat.
- If you are sexually active, the use of a condom will reduce your risk of HPV infection.
- Eat a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables.
- Brush and floss your teeth daily.

Regular visits to your dentist and maintaining a good oral health routine will give you lots to smile about! [vch](#)

Sources:

- Canadian Cancer Society's "Oral Cavity Cancer Statistics" (website)
- Cancer Care Ontario (website)
- Health Canada's "Healthy Living — Oral Cancer" (website)