



# Helping Hands

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## ORAL CANCER

Oral cancer begins in the mouth which is also called the oral cavity. This region includes the lips, the inside lining of the lips and the cheeks (also known as the buccal mucosa) our teeth, gums most of our tongue, the bottom of the mouth, and the bony roof of the mouth, or the hard palate. Oral cancer can also develop in the oropharynx, which is the throat just behind the mouth.

Cancer can develop in any part of the oral cavity. Because each part of the oral cavity is different, oral cancer encompasses a wide variety of cancer types that are treated in many different ways.

Some of the most common oral cancer symptoms and signs are as follows:

- Persistent mouth sore that does not heal, this is the most common symptom of oral cancer.
- Persistent mouth pain is another common sign of oral cancer.
- A lump or thickening in the cheek.
- A white or red patch in the oral cavity.
- Difficulty swallowing or chewing.
- Difficulty moving the jaw or tongue.
- Jaw swelling
- Loosening of the teeth.
- Voice change.
- Weight loss.
- A lump in the neck.

If any of these signs are present for more than a month, please see your primary care physician or dentist for further tests to check for oral cancer. As with all cancer, having it diagnosed as soon as possible will help ensure that any treatment needed is as effective as possible.

Some of the common risk factors associated with oral cancer.

- o **GENDER:** Oral cancer is twice as common in men as is women.

- o **SMOKING:** Cigarette, cigar, or pipe smokers are **six** times more likely than nonsmokers to develop oral cancers.
- o **SMOKELESS TOBACCO USE:** Users of dip, snuff, or shewing tobacco products are 50 times more likely to develop cancers of the cheek, gums, and lining of the lips.
- o **ULTRAVIOLET LIGHT:** Cancers of the lip are common among people who are outdoors a lot with prolonged exposure to sunlight.
- o **POOR NUTRITION:** Studies have found a link between diets low in fruits and vegetables and an increased and oral cancer risk.
- o **EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOL:** Oral cancers are about six times more common in drinkers than in nondrinkers.
- o **FAMILY HISTORY OF CANCER**

As part of your prevention plan make sure to have routine dental exams, your dentist will conduct an oral cancer screening exam during your dental visit. Your dentist will feel for any lumps or irregular tissue changes in your neck, head, face, and oral cavity. When examining your mouth, your dentist will look for any sores or discolored tissue as well as check for any signs and symptoms mentioned above.

Your dentist may perform an oral brush biopsy if she sees tissue in your mouth that looks suspicious. This test is painless and involves taking a small sample of the tissue and analyzing it for abnormal cells. Alternatively, if the tissue looks more suspicious, your dentist may recommend a scalpel biopsy. This procedure usually requires local anesthesia and may be performed by your dentist or a specialist. These tests are necessary to detect oral cancer early, before it has had a chance to progress and spread.