

Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



Reducing Your Risk for Oral Cancer—Something to Smile About

By the National Cancer Institute

Most Americans have embraced the goal of a “healthy” smile with enthusiasm. It is almost impossible to avoid the commercials promoting special toothpastes, toothbrushes, flosses, mouth washes, and whitening solutions—all promising a healthier, brighter smile. Building healthy dental habits for you and your family is important, but it is also important to be aware of other habits that may affect your overall oral health.

According to the National Cancer Institute, approximately 35,000 Americans are diagnosed with oral cancer each year. About 7,600 will die from the disease. The primary risk factors are tobacco and heavy alcohol consumption, which have been linked to approximately 75 percent of oral cancer cases in the United States.

All forms of tobacco, from cigarettes and cigars to pipes and smokeless tobacco, put you at risk for developing oral cancer. Quitting can be hard to do, but it can be done. You may not quit for good the first time you try, but don't give up. People who quit smoking or using tobacco products see both immediate and long-term health benefits—not to mention the money saved by not buying tobacco products. Visit <http://www.smokefree.gov> or call 1-877-44U-QUIT to find free tools and resources to help you quit smoking or stop using chewing tobacco or snuff. To learn more about how tobacco affects your oral cancer risk, visit NCI's website www.cancer.gov. When you search on the homepage, enter the search term “oral.”

If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Not only will this reduce your risk for oral cancer, but it will reduce your risk for other cancers as well. Men should limit their alcoholic intake to no more than two alcoholic beverages a day, and women should limit intake to no more than one alcoholic beverage a day. One drink is 12 ounces of beer, four ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled liquor. Also, the combination of smoking and drinking is associated with a greater increase in risk of oral cancer than doing either one alone. To read more about alcohol and how it affects your cancer risk, visit www.cancer.gov. When you search on the homepage, enter the search term “alcohol.” Other risk factors may include using marijuana, being infected by a certain type of Human Papillomavirus (HPV), and sun exposure.

You should always be on the lookout for any changes in your mouth, especially if you smoke or drink alcohol. Symptoms of oral cancer include a sore, irritation, lump, or thick patch in the mouth, lip, or throat; 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; numbness in the tongue or other areas of the mouth; swelling of the jaw; or pain in one ear without hearing loss. See your doctor if any of these symptoms lasts more than two weeks. Ask your doctor or dentist

for an oral cancer exam. It's quick and painless and could save your life. If oral cancer is caught before the disease has spread, you have a better chance of survival, according to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. During the exam, your doctor or dentist will check your face, neck, lips, entire mouth, and the back of your throat for possible signs of cancer.

Getting educated about oral cancer is a key move towards reducing your risk of the disease. You can also visit www.cancer.gov. When you search on the homepage, enter the search term "oral cancer" for more information. Learn more about oral cancer today—after all, doing everything you can to reduce your risk for oral cancer is something to smile about.

NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI Web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).