

Oral Cancer

What You Need To Know

The Oral Cavity

The inner cheeks, gums, lips, tongue, jaw, teeth, roof of mouth, floor of the mouth, upper part of throat, salivary glands, and tonsils are all parts of the oral cavity. Most oral sores are not harmful, but a small number are dangerous. If not treated, these sores can progress to a harmful stage.

What Is Cancer?

Cancer is when abnormal cells grow and destroy body tissue. Normal, healthy cells grow and replace themselves in the right way. This keeps the body in good repair. Sometimes the cells are not able to control their growth. When this happens, too much tissue is made and tumors are formed.

The cancer can develop in any part of the mouth. The lips, lining of cheeks, the gums, the floor of mouth, and the tongue and pharynx are where the cancer is most often found. If the cancer spreads, it will usually spread through the lymphatic system. It will most likely spread to the lymph nodes in the neck. Even if the cancer spreads to the neck or anywhere else in the body, it is still classified as oral cancer.

Symptoms

Oral cancer can occur at any age, but it most commonly found in people who are older than 45. A monthly self-exam is recommended. Here are some of the warning signs:

- A sore in the mouth that bleeds easily and does not heal
- A lump or thickening in the cheek that can be felt with the tongue
- A white or red patch on the gums, tongue, or mouth
- Soreness or a feeling that something is caught in the throat
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Difficulty moving the jaw or tongue
- Numbness of the tongue or other areas of the mouth
- Swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable

These are not sure signs of cancer, but you should see a dentist or doctor if any of these problems last more than 2 weeks. Pain is NOT usually a symptom.

Diagnosis

Dr. Rockow-Nelson will perform an oral cancer evaluation at your exam appointment. She will carefully check your mouth for lumps, swellings, or abnormal colored tissue. Because harmful oral lesions may look identical to harmless ones, only testing can determine if a lesion is seriously troublesome.

Treatment

The size, location, and extent (stage) of the oral cancer determines the treatment that will be used. The patient's age and general health will also be taken into consideration. The treatment may be radiation therapy, surgery, or both. Treatment may cause side effects that include problems with chewing, talking, swallowing, and physical appearance. This is why it is important for the doctor and patient to carefully plan the treatment to be used. Oral cancer patients may be treated by a team of professionals, including an oncologist, radiation therapist, plastic surgeon, prosthodontist, dietitian, speech therapist, oral surgeon, and ENT surgeon.

Follow Up Care

It is very important to have regular follow up exams. The patient will need to be watched closely to observe the healing process and to make sure that cancer does not return.

Prevention

- You should not use any type of tobacco. This is the most common RISK factor related to oral cancer.
- The use of alcohol increases the risk of oral cancer. Research shows that alcohol and tobacco work together to cause oral cancer.
- Too much exposure to the sun can cause cancer of the lip. You can reduce the risk by using sun block, SPF lip balm, or wearing a hat.
- Oral cancer can also be caused by constant injury to the tissues. This can happen if there are rough edges on the teeth or fillings, poor fitting dentures, or poor mouth care.
- See Dr. Amie Rockow-Nelson, D.D.S. for regular dental check-ups. Also, do a monthly self-exam.