
What You Need To Know About™ Oral Cancer

Posted: 12/23/2009

Risk Factors

When you get a diagnosis of cancer, it's natural to wonder what may have caused the disease. Doctors can't always explain why one person gets oral cancer and another doesn't.

However, we do know that people with certain [risk factors](#) may be more likely than others to develop oral cancer. A risk factor is something that may increase the chance of getting a disease. For example, using tobacco and drinking alcohol are risk factors for oral cancer. Three out of four people with oral cancer have used tobacco, alcohol, or both.

Studies have found the following risk factors for oral cancer:

- **Tobacco:** Tobacco use causes most oral cancers. Smoking cigarettes, cigars, or pipes, or using smokeless tobacco (such as snuff and chewing tobacco) causes oral cancer. The use of other tobacco products (such as [bidis](#) and [kreteks](#)) may also increase the risk of oral cancer. For cigarette smokers, the risk of oral cancer increases with the number of cigarettes smoked per day. The risk is greater for people who use both tobacco and alcohol than for those who use only tobacco or only alcohol.

How to Quit Tobacco

Quitting is important for anyone who uses tobacco. Quitting at any time is beneficial to your health. For people who already have cancer, quitting may reduce the chance of getting another cancer, lung disease, or heart disease caused by tobacco. Quitting can also help cancer treatments work better.

There are many ways to get help:

- Ask your doctor about medicine or nicotine replacement therapy. Your doctor can suggest a number of treatments that help people quit.
- Ask your doctor or dentist to help you find local programs or trained professionals who help people stop using tobacco.
- Call staff at the NCI Smoking Quitline at **1-877-44U-QUIT (1-877-448-7848)** or instant message them through [LiveHelp](#). They can tell you about:

- Ways to quit smoking
- Groups that help smokers who want to quit
- NCI publications about quitting smoking
- How to take part in a study of methods to help smokers quit
- Go online to **Smokefree.gov** (<http://www.smokefree.gov>), a Federal Government Web site. It offers a guide to quitting smoking and a list of other resources.
- **Heavy alcohol use:** People who are heavy drinkers are more likely to develop oral cancer than people who don't drink alcohol. The risk increases with the amount of alcohol that a person drinks. The risk increases even more if the person both drinks alcohol and uses tobacco.
- **HPV infection:** Some members of the HPV family of [viruses](#) can infect the mouth and throat. These viruses are passed from person to person through sexual contact. Cancer at the base of the tongue, at the back of the throat, in the tonsils, or in the soft palate is linked with HPV infection. The NCI fact sheet [HPV and Cancer](#) has more information.
- **Sun:** Cancer of the lip can be caused by exposure to the sun. Using a lotion or lip balm that has a [sunscreen](#) can reduce the risk. Wearing a hat with a brim can also block the sun's harmful rays. The risk of cancer of the lip increases if the person also smokes.
- **A personal history of oral cancer:** People who have had oral cancer are at increased risk of developing another oral cancer. Smoking increases this risk.
- **Diet:** Some studies suggest that not eating enough fruits and vegetables may increase the chance of getting oral cancer.
- **Betel nut use:** Betel nut use is most common in Asia, where millions chew the product. It's a type of palm seed wrapped with a betel leaf and sometimes mixed with spices, sweeteners, and tobacco. Chewing betel nut causes oral cancer. The risk increases even more if the person also drinks alcohol and uses tobacco.

The more risk factors that a person has, the greater the chance that oral cancer will develop. However, most people with known risk factors for oral cancer don't develop the disease.

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