

# Oral Health Tips

## Oral Cancer: Do You Know the Signs?

Did you know that dentists can look for signs of oral cancer during regular dental exams? Regular dental check-ups should include an examination of the entire mouth for early detection of cancerous and pre-cancerous conditions.

You also should know what to look for while brushing and flossing. See your dentist immediately if you observe any of the telltale signs listed below.

### Check Your Mouth Frequently

Oral cancer can affect the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, tongue, and/or the hard or soft palate. Check for:

- Any sore that bleeds easily and persists longer than two weeks
- Swelling, lump, rough spot, crust or small-eroded area anywhere in or around the mouth or neck
- White or red patches in the mouth or on the lips
- Pain, tenderness, or numbness
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw, or tongue
- A change in the way the teeth fit together

### What to Expect in an Oral Exam

- If the sore has a likely cause, the dentist may treat it and request a return visit.
- Spots that may look harmless but don't have a clear cause should be biopsied and followed by the dentist.
- The dentist may use a diagnostic tool called a brush biopsy, which can render a preliminary diagnosis from lab analysis.
- If the result of the biopsy is suspicious for oral cancer, your dentist may recommend a surgical biopsy with lab analysis that will be more definitive in diagnosing oral cancer.

### Risk Factors

- **Tobacco/Alcohol Use:** Cigarettes, cigars, pipes, and smokeless tobacco increase the risk of oral cancer — even more so when combined with alcohol use.
- **Sunlight:** Prolonged exposure to the sun increases risk for lip cancer.
- **Age:** Those over age 40 are the most vulnerable.
- **Gender:** Oral cancer affects men twice as often as it does women.
- **Race:** African Americans, especially males, are at greater risk of death from oral cancer. Oral cancers do occur in people who do not use tobacco or who have no other known identifiable risk factors. That's why it is important to have regular oral examinations that include an oral cancer check-up — catching a potential problem early can make a big difference in the outcome.
- **Human Papilloma Virus:** The Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) may contribute to the development of approximately 25% of oral cancer cases.

Sources: Academy of General Dentistry: [www.agd.org](http://www.agd.org); American Dental Association: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org); National Institutes of Health: [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

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