

Mouth, Head and Neck Cancers

What you should know

What are mouth, head and neck cancers?

Mouth, head and neck cancers are the different types of cancer that can affect your lips, gums, cheeks, tongue, palate, tonsil, throat, salivary glands, sinuses, nose and voice box (larynx).

Mouth, head and neck cancers happen when normal cells grow in an abnormal way to form a mass of cells called a tumour in the tissues of your mouth, head or neck.

Some facts about mouth, head and neck cancers

- ▶ Mouth, head and neck cancers are not common. Around 820 people are diagnosed in Ireland every year.
- ▶ The earlier they are diagnosed, the greater the chance that you will survive.
- ▶ Mouth, head and neck cancers mainly affect people over the age of 50, but they are becoming more common in younger people.
- ▶ Ear and eye cancers can also occur, but these are rare.

What increases my risk of mouth, head and neck cancers?



Smoking: If you smoke, you are more at risk of developing cancer of the mouth, tonsil, throat, larynx or lung. Pipe smokers have an increased risk of lip cancer. If you chew tobacco, you have a higher risk of developing mouth cancers. All types of tobacco use increase your risk of mouth, head and neck cancer. There is no safe use of tobacco.



Age: Your risk increases as you get older. While these cancers are more common in people over 50 years of age, they are increasing in people under 50.



Gender: These cancers are more common in men than women, but rates in women are rising.



Alcohol: If you drink a lot of alcohol (more than 10 standard drinks per week), particularly spirits, you are 40 times more likely to develop a head and neck cancer. If you smoke and drink alcohol, the risk could be up to 200 times higher.



Other risk factors: Sun exposure increases your risk of cancer of the ear, nose and lip.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infection can increase the risk of cancers in the tongue, tonsil, soft palate and throat.

Exposure to chemicals and dusts in the workplace is linked to throat cancer.

Risk factors increase your chance of getting mouth, head and neck cancers. Having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get these cancers. Sometimes people with no risk factors may get the disease.

What are the symptoms of mouth, head and neck cancers?

The symptoms of mouth, head and neck cancers depend on where the tumour is found. Symptoms can include:

- ▶ A sore or ulcer in your mouth that does not heal within 3 weeks.
- ▶ Trouble or pain chewing or swallowing.
- ▶ Sore throat, trouble speaking, or having a hoarse voice.
- ▶ An unexplained loose tooth.
- ▶ A swelling or lump in your mouth or neck.
- ▶ Pain in your face or jaw.
- ▶ Earache, ringing in your ear or hearing problems.
- ▶ Numbness in your tongue or face.
- ▶ A blocked or bleeding nose.
- ▶ White or red patches in your mouth or on your tongue that don't go away within 3 weeks.

These symptoms can be caused by other things, but always get them checked out.

What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you have any symptoms or changes in your mouth, head or neck that you are worried about, it's important to have them checked by your GP (family doctor) or dentist. The chances are it will not be cancer. Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone's time. The sooner cancer is spotted, the more likely it is to be treated successfully.



How are mouth, head and neck cancers diagnosed?

If your doctor thinks your symptoms need to be investigated, you will have more tests. Tests that can help to diagnose mouth, head and neck cancers include:



Physical examination: A specialist inspects your mouth, throat, tongue, nose and neck for changes or lumps.



Scopes: A doctor puts a flexible tube with a light and a camera into your nose or throat to look for changes.



Biopsy: A specialist takes tissue samples from inside your body and examines them under a microscope.

If you are diagnosed with cancer, our booklet has more information.



How can I reduce my risk of mouth, head and neck cancers?



Don't smoke: By far the most important thing you can do to reduce your risk of mouth, head and neck cancers is to stop smoking. Your risk of mouth, head and neck cancers is increased by smoking:

- ▶ Cigarettes.
- ▶ Pipes.
- ▶ Cigars.
- ▶ Hand-rolled cigarettes.
- ▶ Low-tar cigarettes.

It's never too late to quit. The sooner you stop, the more you reduce your risk. The Irish Cancer Society does not recommend using e-cigarettes as a stop-smoking aid because they are not proven to work. See the end of this leaflet for contact information for the HSE Quit.ie programme.



Cut down or cut out alcohol: Alcohol is a major risk factor for mouth head and neck cancers. Drinking alcohol and smoking in combination greatly increase your risk. The less you drink, the lower your risk.



Protect your skin: Use sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher (SPF 50 or higher for children), even on cool or cloudy days, and wear a lip balm that contains sunblock.



Check your mouth and visit your dentist regularly: Check your mouth for changes every month. Dentists are trained to examine the hard and soft tissues of the mouth and spot any changes. Try to go at least once a year.



Look out for any changes that are not normal for you: The earlier cancer is spotted, the more likely it is to be treated successfully. Talk to your doctor if you notice anything unusual, like:

- ▶ Pain.
- ▶ Unusual bleeding.
- ▶ New symptoms that don't clear up after a few weeks.

Can I be screened for mouth, head and neck cancers?

Testing for cancer when you have no symptoms is called screening. There is no mouth, head and neck cancer screening programme in Ireland at present, but many dentists provide mouth screening as part of a routine dental check-up.

If you are worried or feel you may be at risk, talk to your dentist or your GP without delay.

Want to stop smoking?

Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do to reduce your risk of cancer. If you would like advice or support on quitting:

- ▶ Call the HSE Quit Team on CallSave 1800 201 203
- ▶ Freetext QUIT to 50100
- ▶ Visit www.quit.ie

Contact us for more information or support

If you are worried or have questions about mouth, head and neck cancers or any cancer:



**Call our Support Line on Freephone
1800 200 700.**



Email supportline@irishcancer.ie

We will provide you with confidential advice, support and information.



Ask about a call in your language.

Visit our **Daffodil Centres** where our nurses can give you advice about how to spot cancer early and how to help prevent it. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email **daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie**

Visit our website **www.cancer.ie** for more information on mouth, head and neck cancers and ways you can reduce your risk of cancer.

