

# Oral Cancer: Risk Factors



## What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of having a disease. Risk factors for a certain type of cancer might include smoking, diet, family history, or many other things. The exact cause of someone's cancer may not be known. But risk factors can make it more likely for a person to have cancer.

Things you should know about risk factors for cancer:

- Risk factors can increase a person's risk, but they don't always cause the disease.
- Some people with 1 or more risk factors never develop cancer. Other people with cancer have no risk factors.
- Some risk factors are very well known. But there's ongoing research about risk factors for many types of cancer.

Some risk factors, such as family history, may not be in your control. But others may be things you can change. Knowing the risk factors can help you make choices that might lower your risk. For example, if an unhealthy diet is a risk factor, you may choose to eat healthy foods. If excess weight is a risk factor, your healthcare provider may help you lose weight.

## Who is at risk for oral cancer?

Oral cancer is twice as common in men as it is in women. You're also at higher risk for oral cancer if you have any of these:

- **A history of tobacco use.** All forms of tobacco products increase your risk for oral cancer. This includes cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco, chewing tobacco, and snuff. The younger you are when you start using tobacco and the longer you've used it, the greater your risk. Most people with oral cancer use tobacco. People who use snuff have a much higher risk of cancer in the lips, cheeks, and gums. Pipe smokers are at increased risk for lip cancers in areas where the pipe stem rests.
- **Heavy alcohol use.** Drinking alcohol increases your risk for oral cancer. If you drink a lot of alcohol and use tobacco products, you have an even greater risk of getting oral cancer. It is best not to drink alcohol. People assigned male at birth who do drink alcohol should limit themselves to 2 drinks or fewer per day. People assigned female at birth who drink alcohol should limit themselves to 1 drink or fewer per day.
- **A lot of sun exposure.** Extensive exposure to the sun increases your risk for lip cancer.
- **HPV infection.** Human papillomaviruses (HPV) cause warts on various parts of the body. A few HPV types are linked to some oral cancers.
- **Poor diet.** Research has suggested that not eating enough fruits and vegetables can increase the risk of these cancers.
- **Betel nut use.** Chewing betel nut (betel quid) or gutka increases the risk for oral cancer. Betel nut use is most common in Asia, but also occurs in the U.S.
- **Fanconi anemia or dyskeratosis congenita.** People with either of these inherited syndromes have a high risk for oral or throat cancer. These conditions are caused by inherited defects in certain genes.
- **Older age.** People 45 or older have an increased risk for oral cancer. But a person can have it at any age.

## What are your risk factors?

Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for oral cancer and what you can do about them. If you use tobacco, 1 of the most important things you can do is quit. Ask your healthcare provider for resources to help you quit.

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