

# Head and Neck 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 one or more risk factors never develop cancer. And some people with cancer have no known 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 or age, may not be in your control. But others may be things you can change. Knowing what the risk factors are can help you make choices that might help lower your risk. For instance, if an unhealthy diet is a risk factor, you may choose to eat healthier foods. If excess weight is a risk factor, you might want to talk with your healthcare provider about how to lose weight.

## Who is at risk for head and neck cancer?



Risk factors for head and neck cancer include:

- **Using tobacco.** Tobacco use is the single largest risk factor for head and neck cancer. People who smoke, chew tobacco, dip snuff, or smoke pipes have a much higher chance of getting head and neck cancer than people who do not. Smokeless tobacco greatly increases the risk. The risk is related to the amount used—how many cigarettes, cigars, or pipes you smoke or how often you chew or dip. The risk is also related to how many years you've used tobacco. Smoking marijuana or being exposed to secondhand smoke (other people's smoke) may also increase your risk of head and neck cancer.
- **Alcohol use.** Drinking a lot and drinking often increases your risk. If you drink heavily and smoke, your risk is many times higher.
- **Unhealthy diet.** A diet that is low in vitamins A and B and fruits and vegetables might increase your risk for head and neck cancer. Eating a lot of processed or salt-cured meat can also increase risk.
- **Poor mouth care.** Not taking care of your mouth and teeth may increase your risk of head and neck cancer. For instance, dentures that don't fit well can trap substances like alcohol and tobacco particles, which may increase risk. A history of gum disease and tooth loss may put you at higher risk.
- **Certain virus infections.** Infection with certain types of HPV (human papillomavirus) increases your risk for some kinds of head and neck cancer. Exposure to the Epstein-Barr virus, the virus that causes mononucleosis, can increase the risk of nasopharyngeal and salivary gland cancers.
- **Sun exposure.** Lip cancer is more common in people who spend a lot of time in the sun. Sun exposure on unprotected skin on the head, face, ears, and neck can lead to skin cancer.
- **Gender.** Men are at 2 to 3 times greater risk than women. But the rate of head and neck cancer in women has been increasing for a few decades.
- **Age.** People older than age 40 have an increased risk.
- **Certain exposures at work.** People who have been exposed to things like sulfuric acid mist, nickel, wood dust, paint fumes, formaldehyde, or asbestos on the job have an increased risk of developing head and neck cancer. Those working around these substances should follow safety and work regulations, such as adequate ventilation in the workplace and using respirators, to avoid breathing in dangerous chemicals.
- **Weakened immune system.** Those with suppressed immune systems, such as people who have had organ transplants or people living with AIDS, are at a higher risk for some kinds of head and neck cancer.
- **Inherited syndromes.** Certain genetic diseases passed in families, like Fanconi anemia, put people at a higher risk for head and neck cancers.

## What are your risk factors?

Most risk factors for head and neck cancer are things you can control, especially the two biggest risk factors: tobacco and alcohol use.

Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for head and neck cancer and what you can do to control them.

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