



[Home](#) → [Health Topics](#) → Oral Cancer

URL of this page: <https://medlineplus.gov/oralcancer.html>

# Oral Cancer

## What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer is cancer of the mouth. It is a type of **head and neck cancer** [<https://medlineplus.gov/headandneckcancer.html>] . Most oral cancers are **squamous cell cancers** [<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/head-and-neck-squamous-cell-carcinoma/>] . They begin in the flat cells that cover the surfaces of your mouth, tongue, and lips. The cancer cells may spread into deeper tissue as the cancer grows.

Most oral cancers are related to tobacco use, heavy alcohol use, or an HPV infection [<https://medlineplus.gov/hpv.html>] .

## Who is more likely to develop oral cancer?

Anyone can get oral cancer, but you are more likely to develop it if you:

- Use tobacco or drink lots of alcohol. Your risk of developing oral cancer is even higher if you do both.
- Are male.
- Are over age 40.
- Have HPV.
- Have a history of head or neck cancer.
- Get frequent sun exposure [<https://medlineplus.gov/sunexposure.html>] (for lip cancer).

## What are the symptoms of oral cancer?

The symptoms of oral cancer may include:

- A white or red patch in your mouth
- A lip or mouth sore that won't heal
- Bleeding, pain, or numbness in the lip or mouth
- Loose teeth or dentures that no longer fit well
- Problems or pain with **swallowing** [<https://medlineplus.gov/swallowingdisorders.html>]
- A lump in your neck
- Ear pain
- Trouble moving your mouth or jaw
- Swelling of the jaw
- A **sore throat** [<https://medlineplus.gov/sorethroat.html>] or feeling that something is caught in the throat

If you have any of these symptoms for more than two weeks, see your health care provider or dentist. Oral cancer can spread quickly, so it's important to find it early.

## How is oral cancer diagnosed?

To find out if you have oral cancer, your provider may use:

- A physical exam of the lips and mouth.

- An endoscopy [<https://medlineplus.gov/endoscopy.html>] .
- A biopsy [<https://medlineplus.gov/biopsy.html>] or other procedure to collect cells from the lip or oral cavity. The cells are viewed under a microscope to find out if they are abnormal.
- Imaging tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/diagnosticimaging.html>] .

## What are the treatments for oral cancer?

The treatments for oral cancer include surgery, radiation therapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/radiationtherapy.html>] , or both. After surgery, some people also need chemotherapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/cancerchemotherapy.html>] to kill any cancer cells that are left.



## Can oral cancer be prevented?

There are steps you can take to help prevent oral cancer:


- Not smoking
- Limiting alcohol use or not drinking at all
- Getting regular dental exams [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/dental-exam/>]

*NIH: National Cancer Institute*



## Start Here

- General Information about Lip and Oral Cavity Cancer [[https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/adult/lip-mouth-treatment-pdq#\\_1](https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/adult/lip-mouth-treatment-pdq#_1)]  (National Cancer Institute)  
Also in Spanish [[https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/adulto/tratamiento-labio-boca-pdq#\\_1](https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/adulto/tratamiento-labio-boca-pdq#_1)]
- Mouth Cancer [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mouth-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20350997?p=1>]  
(Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
- Oral Cancer [<https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/health-info/oral-cancer>]  (National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/espanol/temas-de-salud/cancer-oral>]
- Oral Cancer Facts [<https://oralcancerfoundation.org/facts/>] (Oral Cancer Foundation)

## Diagnosis and Tests

- Oral Cancer Exam [<https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/oral-cancer-exam.pdf>]  
(National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research) - **PDF**
- Oral Cavity and Nasopharyngeal Cancers Screening [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/oral-screening-pdq#section/all>]  (National Cancer Institute)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/deteccion-cavidad-oral-pdq>]
- Panoramic Dental X-Ray [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/en/info/panoramic-xray>]  
(American College of Radiology; Radiological Society of North America)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/es/info/panoramic-xray>]

## Prevention and Risk Factors

- Oral Cavity, Oropharyngeal, Hypopharyngeal, and Laryngeal Cancers Prevention [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/oral-prevention-pdq#section/all>]  (National Cancer Institute)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/prevencion-cavidad-oral-pdq>]
- Oral, Head, and Neck Pathology [<https://myoms.org/what-we-do/oral-head-and-neck-pathology/>]  
 (American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons)

## Treatments and Therapies

- Treatment Options for Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancer by Stage [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer/treating/by-stage.html>] (American Cancer Society)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/tipos/cancer-de-orofaringe-y-de-cavidad-oral/tratamiento/por-etapa.html>]

# Living With

- Mouth Dryness or Thick Saliva [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/eating-problems/dry-mouth.html>] (American Cancer Society)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/como-sobrellevar-el-cancer/efectos-secundarios/problemas-alimentarios/resequedad-de-la-boca.html>]
- Mouth Sores and Pain [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/eating-problems/mouth-sores.html>] (American Cancer Society)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/como-sobrellevar-el-cancer/efectos-secundarios/problemas-alimentarios/lagas-en-la-boca.html>]
- Swallowing Problems [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/eating-problems/swallowing-problems.html>] (American Cancer Society)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/como-sobrellevar-el-cancer/efectos-secundarios/problemas-alimentarios/problemas-de-deglucion.html>]


## Related Issues

- Mouth Growths [<https://www.merckmanuals.com/home/mouth-and-dental-disorders/symptoms-of-oral-and-dental-disorders/mouth-growths>] (Merck & Co., Inc.)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.merckmanuals.com/es-us/hogar/trastornos-bucales-y-dentales/s%C3%ADntomas-de-los-trastornos-orales-y-dentales/tumores-bucales>]



## Specifics

- Tongue Cancer [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/tongue-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20378428?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/tongue-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20378428?p=1>]

## Statistics and Research

- Cancer Stat Facts: Cancer of the Oral Cavity and Pharynx [<https://seer.cancer.gov/statfacts/html/oralcav.html>]  (National Cancer Institute)
- Key Statistics for Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancers [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer/about/key-statistics.html>] (American Cancer Society)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/tipos/cancer-de-orofaringe-y-de-cavidad-oral/acerca/estadisticas-clave.html>]

## Clinical Trials

- ClinicalTrials.gov: Mouth Neoplasms [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Mouth+Neoplasms%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)
- ClinicalTrials.gov: Tongue Neoplasms [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Tongue+Neoplasms%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)


## Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)



- Article: Effects of Maackia amurensis seed lectin (MASL) on OSCC cell morphology, ... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40681758>]
- Article: Impairment of neck and shoulder function after neck dissection: a comparative ... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40660227>]
- Article: A prospective comparative study of pre-op chemoradiotherapy followed by surgery versus ... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40616538>]
- Oral Cancer -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Mouth+Neoplasms%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bedat%5D+AND+%28patient+education+handout%5Bpt%5D+OR+guideline%5Bpt%5D+OR+clinic>]

al+trial%5Bpt%5D%29++NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+]


## Reference Desk

- Dictionary of Cancer Terms [<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms>]  (National Cancer Institute)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/publicaciones/diccionarios/diccionario-cancer/>]

## Find an Expert

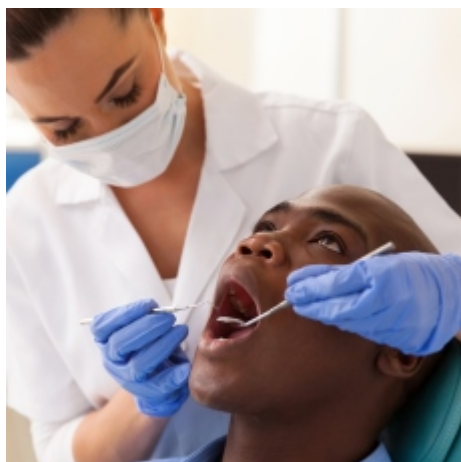
- American Cancer Society [<https://www.cancer.org/>]
- Choosing a Cancer Doctor [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/where-to-find-cancer-care/choosing-a-cancer-doctor.html>] (American Cancer Society)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/como-sobrellevar-el-cancer/encontrar-tratamiento/como-elegir-un-medico-y-un-hospital/como-seleccionar-a-un-medico.html>]
- Find an ENT (Ear, Nose, and Throat Specialist) [<https://www.enthealth.org/find-ent/>]  
(American Academy of Otolaryngology--Head and Neck Surgery)
- Find an Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon [<https://myoms.org/find-a-surgeon/>]  
(American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons)
- National Cancer Institute [<https://www.cancer.gov/>]   
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/>]
- National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research [<https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/>]   
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/espanol/>]

## Children

- Childhood Oral Cavity Cancer Treatment [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/child/oral-cavity-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/infantil/tratamiento-cavidad-oral-pdq>]

## Patient Handouts

- Leukoplakia [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001046.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/001046.htm>]
- Oral cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001035.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/001035.htm>]
- Swallowing problems [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000065.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000065.htm>]
- Tongue biopsy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003849.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003849.htm>]



After chemotherapy - discharge [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000012.htm>]

Gum biopsy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003852.htm>]

Leukoplakia [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001046.htm>]

Mouth and neck radiation - discharge [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000058.htm>]

Oral cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001035.htm>]

Oropharynx lesion biopsy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003850.htm>]

Swallowing problems [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000065.htm>]

Tongue biopsy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003849.htm>]

## Related Health Topics

Mouth Disorders [<https://medlineplus.gov/mouthdisorders.html>]

Salivary Gland Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/salivaryglandcancer.html>]

Throat Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/throatcancer.html>]

## National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Oral Cancer* is the National Cancer Institute [<http://www.cancer.gov/>]

## Other Languages

Find health information in languages other than English [<https://medlineplus.gov/languages/oralcancer.html>] on *Oral Cancer*

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