

# Oral Cancer: Reducing Your Risk

## What Is Oral Cancer?

Oral cancer is cancer of the mouth. It can affect the lips, tongue, roof or floor of the mouth, or cheeks.

Around 930 New Yorkers are diagnosed with oral cancer each year, and around 200 die. Diagnosing oral cancer at an early stage increases survival rates.

Anyone can develop oral cancer, but certain factors can increase your risk.



## What Are Risk Factors for Oral Cancer?

### Tobacco and Alcohol Use

- Many oral cancers are caused by tobacco use. People with a history of smoking cigarettes, cigars or pipes, or using smokeless tobacco, such as chewing tobacco, are at higher risk.
- The more heavily and often you drink alcohol, the greater your risk for oral cancer. All types of alcoholic drinks increase your risk. If a person drinks heavily and uses tobacco, their risk is especially high.

### Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Infection

- HPV is a very common virus. Eight out of 10 people will get HPV at some point in their lives.
- HPV causes 70% of mouth and throat cancers in the U.S.

### Sunlight

- Excessive exposure to the sun for long periods can cause lip cancer.

### Age and Sex

- The risk of developing oral cancer increases as a person ages.
- Oral cancer occurs twice as often in men as in women.

## What Does Oral Cancer Look Like?

Oral cancer can appear differently depending on the person and the location of the cancer cells in the mouth. Although most changes in the mouth or on the lips are not caused by cancer, visit your dentist for an oral cancer screening if you notice any of the following:

- White patches that cannot be removed with a washcloth
- Brightly colored red patches that do not heal after two weeks
- A sore that does not heal after two weeks
- Difficulty or pain when swallowing



White patches in the mouth may be a sign of oral cancer.

- Difficulty wearing dentures
- Lumps in the neck
- An earache that does not go away
- Numbness of the lower lip and chin
- A persistent cough or hoarseness

## Reduce Your Risk

### 1. Seek treatment, and try to quit tobacco use.

The best way to lower your risk of developing oral cancer is to stop smoking or vaping and to stop using smokeless tobacco products. There are several treatments available, including flexible options to allow you to stop gradually. Ask your dentist or health care provider (such as a physician) for information about medicine and counseling options. Visit the New York State Smokers' Quitline at [nysmokefree.com](http://nysmokefree.com) or call 866-NY-QUITS (866-697-8487) to talk to a quit coach or see if you qualify for tools, such as nicotine patches, gum or lozenges, to quit smoking or vaping.

### 2. Speak to your health care provider about getting the HPV vaccine.

The HPV vaccine protects against the major types of HPV that can cause cancer, including oral cancer.

- Routine HPV vaccination is recommended at age 11 or 12 and can be started as early as age 9 for all youth and young adults through age 26.
- The HPV vaccine is also approved for some adults age 27 through 45.

### 3. Use sunscreen.

Using a lotion or lip balm that has sunscreen can reduce the chance of developing lip cancer. Wearing a hat with a brim can also help protect your lips from the sun.

### 4. Visit your dentist regularly.

It is important to see your dentist at least once per year, even if you do not have natural teeth. During your appointment, the dentist will check your mouth for signs of oral cancer. If you notice any unusual changes in your lips, mouth or cheeks between visits, see your dentist or health care provider as soon as possible.

Contact your dentist or health care provider right away if you are in pain or need care. For help finding a health care provider, call **311** or NYC Health + Hospitals at 844-NYC-4NYC (844-692-4692). To learn more about or find help enrolling in Medicaid, Child Health Plus, the Essential Plan or Qualified Health Plans, call 347-665-0214 or visit [nyc.gov/health/healthcoverage](http://nyc.gov/health/healthcoverage).

To learn more about oral cancer and oral health, visit [nyc.gov/health/teeth](http://nyc.gov/health/teeth).