Mouth Cancer: Risk Factors and Warning Signs | Core Dental

Canonical: https://www.coredental.com.au/everything-you-may-need-to-know-about-mouth-cancer/

Details:

Mouth cancer, also called oral cancer, is a disease that can affect any part of the mouth. The tongue, lips and floor of the mouth are commonly affected, though it can develop anywhere in the oral cavity. Known risk factors include smoking, heavy alcohol use, human papillomavirus (HPV) and sun exposure on the lips. A mouth ulcer that has not healed within three weeks, or a persistent lump or patch, should be checked promptly by a dentist or doctor.

What is mouth cancer?

Mouth cancer is a disease in which abnormal cells grow in the tissues of the mouth. It can appear on the tongue, the lips, the floor of the mouth, the gums, the inside of the cheeks or the roof of the mouth. Cancers that start further back, at the base of the tongue, the soft palate, the tonsils and the back of the throat, are known as oropharyngeal cancers.

As with many cancers, finding mouth cancer early matters. That is one reason why we look at the soft tissues of your mouth at every check-up.

What are the main risk factors for mouth cancer?

Recognised risk factors include:

smoking and other tobacco use

drinking alcohol heavily

human papillomavirus (HPV) infection

sun damage, particularly for cancers of the lip

Having a risk factor does not mean you will develop mouth cancer, and some people with no obvious risk factors are also affected. If you smoke or drink heavily, let your dentist know, as it helps us decide how closely to look and gives us a chance to talk about support to quit.

Can HPV cause mouth cancer?

Yes. Some types of HPV can cause oropharyngeal cancer, which affects the base of the tongue, the back of the throat, the soft palate and the tonsils. HPV is common, and most people who have it never develop cancer. Your doctor can talk with you about HPV vaccination and about what it protects against.

What are the warning signs and symptoms of mouth cancer?

Changes to look out for include:

white or red patches on the tongue, gums or lining of the mouth

an ulcer that does not heal, particularly one that lasts more than three weeks

a lump or thickening inside the mouth

unexplained bleeding, pain or numbness in the mouth

difficulty chewing, swallowing or speaking

difficulty moving the jaw or tongue

loose teeth that have no clear cause

a change in the way your teeth or dentures fit together

swelling in the mouth or jaw

Most mouth ulcers and patches are not cancer, and many have simple causes such as a cheek bite or a sharp tooth. Even so, a change that persists should always be looked at. See our guide to mouth ulcers and what could be the cause .

How long should you wait before getting a mouth ulcer checked?

A mouth ulcer that has not healed within three weeks is considered a warning sign and should be checked by a dentist or doctor. Please do not wait longer to see whether it settles on its own. If you have a lump, a patch or any unexplained bleeding, numbness or swelling, we suggest making an appointment sooner.

How can you reduce your risk of mouth cancer?

Not smoking and keeping alcohol within safe limits are two important steps. Protecting your lips from the sun, with a lip balm containing sunscreen and a hat, may also help. See our article on how smoking affects your oral health .

Regular dental visits are recommended too, because a dentist is often the first person to notice early changes. At a routine examination at Core Dental we look inside your mouth and check your throat and neck for lumps or swellings. If we find something unusual, we will explain it and refer you for further assessment where needed.

What happens if your dentist finds something unusual?

We will explain what we have seen, how long it has been there and what we suggest next. This may mean reviewing the area again after a short time, or referring you to a doctor or specialist for tests such as a biopsy. A diagnosis can only be made by a medical or specialist team, not from a visual check alone. We will help arrange this promptly.

The numbers, and the two-week rule

Mouth cancer pages often avoid figures. The published figures are the most persuasive thing on the subject, and there is one instruction attached to them that is worth memorising.

How common it is in this state. The Victorian Department of Health: "More than 853 people in Victoria are diagnosed with mouth cancer each year - that's over 16 people diagnosed every week."

What causes most of it. "Tobacco and alcohol are responsible for over 75% of mouth cancers, by exposing your mouth to cancer-causing substances (carcinogens)." And: "The two main risk factors for mouth cancer are alcohol and tobacco use, and the combined effect of drinking and smoking is far greater."

The individual risk multipliers, as published. "If you smoke or chew tobacco or 'paan' (betel quid preparation), you are twice as likely to develop mouth cancer than a non-smoker." And: "Mouth cancer is six times more common in alcohol drinkers than in non-drinkers. The more you drink, the greater the risk." On sex: "Men are three times as likely to develop mouth cancer as women."

The other risk factors. "Human papillomavirus (HPV)"; "Being over 40 years of age"; "Being male"; "Sun exposure - ultraviolet (UV) radiation can lead to skin cancer on the lips"; "Being overweight or obese."

The symptoms. "A visible mass or lump that may or may not be painful"; "An ulcer that won't heal"; "White or red patches on the mouth, tongue or gums"; "Loss of sensation anywhere in the mouth"; "Trouble swallowing"; "Reduced tongue movement"; "Difficulty moving your jaw"; "Loose teeth or sore gums"; "Changes in taste"; "Swollen lymph glands."

And now the rule. "Having these symptoms does not mean that you have mouth cancer, but if you experience any of these for more than two weeks, you should speak to your dental practitioner or doctor."

Two weeks. Both halves of that sentence matter: these symptoms are common and usually something else, and two weeks is the point at which you stop waiting. The Department's dental anxiety page gives the same instruction in different words: "If you notice a mouth ulcer that lasts for longer than 2 weeks, get it checked by a dentist as soon as you can."

Where it tends to start. "The most common sites of mouth cancer are the lips, tongue and floor of the mouth, but it can also develop in the gums, the inside lining of the cheeks, roof of the mouth, hard and soft palate, tonsils and salivary glands."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Mouth cancer, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 September 2025); Dental anxiety and phobia, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025). Both accessed 6 November 2026.

Why the dental chair is where this often gets found

A routine check-up includes a look at the soft tissues, and the published advice is explicit that early diagnosis is what changes the outcome.

Why timing matters. "Mouth cancer can be treated if diagnosed early, so it's important to see your dental practitioner or doctor immediately if you notice any changes in your mouth." And: "Treatment for mouth cancer is most effective if the disease is diagnosed early."

How it spreads if it is not caught. "The skin of the mouth, nose and throat are lined with flat, firm cells called squamous cells. Most mouth cancers originate in these surface cells. Without treatment, squamous cell carcinoma can spread deeper, including to the muscle and bone, or to the throat or lymph glands in the neck. Mouth cancer can also spread to other parts of the body if it gets into the bloodstream or lymphatic system, so it's important to diagnose and treat it early."

What a dental examination covers. The Department's description of a check-up: "Soft tissues in the mouth (gums, tongue, lips, cheeks and palate) are also checked for signs of oral cancer and other possible problems. Your dentist may also check your jaw joints and the lymph nodes in your neck."

And on anxiety and avoidance, it makes the point directly: "During regular check-ups, dentists also check for signs of mouth cancer. This is especially important for those who smoke or regularly drink alcohol, and even more so for those who do both."

For people who smoke, its smoking advice repeats it: "It is very important for people who smoke to visit their dentist regularly to keep their teeth and gums healthy and check for signs of mouth cancer." And for people who vape: "It is also important for people who vape to visit a dentist regularly to detect and treat any oral health problems. If you vape, make sure to tell your dentist this."

How a diagnosis is made. "Physical examination of the mouth by your dentist or doctor"; "Biopsy (taking a sample of skin of the mouth for examination in a laboratory)"; "X-ray"; "Ultrasound"; "CT scan"; "MRI

(magnetic resonance imaging) scan"; "PET (position emission tomography) scan."

What treatment can involve. Surgery, where "the tumour is surgically removed, if small"; radiation therapy, where "small, precise doses of ionising radiation target and destroy cancer cells" and which "is often all that's needed for small, localised cancers"; chemotherapy, "the use of cancer-killing drugs, often in combination with surgery and/or radiotherapy"; multi-modal treatments; "long term monitoring", which "may include regular oral examinations and occasional X-rays to make sure the cancer hasn't come back"; and ongoing care, which "may include speech therapy, dietary advice, regular medical follow-up and counselling".

How to reduce the risk. "Reduce your risk by stopping smoking, reducing the amount of alcohol you drink and maintaining a healthy diet and weight." The Department's general oral health advice says the same more briefly: "Quit smoking and limit alcohol intake to reduce your risk of oral cancer." It points to Quitline for help with smoking, and notes that quitting "reduces the risk of developing gum disease and mouth cancer".

One honest note about waiting for results. "Test results can take a few days to come back. It is natural to feel anxious waiting to get your results. It can help to talk to a close friend or relative about how you're feeling."

Sources: Better Health Channel (Victorian Department of Health), Mouth cancer, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 11 September 2025); Dental treatment, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 3 June 2026); Dental anxiety and phobia, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 22 October 2025); Effects of smoking and vaping on oral health, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 24 September 2025); Teeth and mouth care, betterhealth.vic.gov.au (reviewed 25 July 2025). All accessed 6 November 2026.

Frequently asked questions

Is a dental check-up enough to find mouth cancer?

A check-up includes a visual and hands-on screen of the mouth, head and neck, which can help find changes early. It cannot confirm a diagnosis. If your dentist sees something unusual, you will be referred for further tests.

Does mouth cancer always cause pain?

No. Early mouth cancer can be painless, which is why changes such as a patch, lump or ulcer that does not heal are worth checking even if they do not hurt. Pain, numbness or bleeding can also be signs.

I smoke. Should I see a dentist more often?

Smoking is a recognised risk factor for mouth cancer and gum disease. Your dentist may suggest more frequent check-ups and can offer advice about quitting. Please tell us about any tobacco or alcohol use so that we can look after you properly.

Is a white patch in my mouth always cancer?

No. Many white or red patches have harmless causes. Some, however, need monitoring or a biopsy, so a patch that persists should be assessed by a dentist or doctor rather than left.

Who can diagnose mouth cancer?

A diagnosis is made by doctors and specialists, usually after a biopsy. Your dentist can screen for warning signs and refer you. Registered specialists include oral and maxillofacial surgeons, who work with other health professionals.

How common is mouth cancer in Victoria?

The Victorian Department of Health: "More than 853 people in Victoria are diagnosed with mouth cancer each year - that's over 16 people diagnosed every week."

What causes most cases?

"Tobacco and alcohol are responsible for over 75% of mouth cancers", and "the combined effect of drinking and smoking is far greater" than either alone.

How much does smoking raise the risk?

"If you smoke or chew tobacco or 'paan' (betel quid preparation), you are twice as likely to develop mouth cancer than a non-smoker."

And alcohol?

"Mouth cancer is six times more common in alcohol drinkers than in non-drinkers. The more you drink, the greater the risk."

What are the other risk factors?

"Human papillomavirus (HPV)"; "Being over 40 years of age"; "Being male - Men are three times as likely to develop mouth cancer as women"; "Sun exposure - ultraviolet (UV) radiation can lead to skin cancer on the lips"; "Being overweight or obese."

What are the symptoms?

"A visible mass or lump that may or may not be painful"; "An ulcer that won't heal"; "White or red patches on the mouth, tongue or gums"; "Loss of sensation anywhere in the mouth"; "Trouble swallowing"; "Reduced tongue movement"; "Difficulty moving your jaw"; "Loose teeth or sore gums"; "Changes in taste"; "Swollen lymph glands."

Do these symptoms mean I have mouth cancer?

Usually not, and the Department says so plainly: "Having these symptoms does not mean that you have mouth cancer, but if you experience any of these for more than two weeks, you should speak to your dental practitioner or doctor."

Where does it usually start?

"The most common sites of mouth cancer are the lips, tongue and floor of the mouth, but it can also develop in the gums, the inside lining of the cheeks, roof of the mouth, hard and soft palate, tonsils and salivary glands."

Does a dental check-up look for it?

Yes. "Soft tissues in the mouth (gums, tongue, lips, cheeks and palate) are also checked for signs of oral cancer and other possible problems. Your dentist may also check your jaw joints and the lymph nodes in your neck." The Department adds that this "is especially important for those who smoke or regularly drink alcohol, and even more so for those who do both".

Why does early diagnosis matter so much?

"Mouth cancer can be treated if diagnosed early." Without treatment, "squamous cell carcinoma can spread deeper, including to the muscle and bone, or to the throat or lymph glands in the neck", and it "can also spread to other parts of the body if it gets into the bloodstream or lymphatic system".

How is it diagnosed?

"Physical examination of the mouth by your dentist or doctor"; "Biopsy (taking a sample of skin of the mouth for examination in a laboratory)"; "X-ray"; "Ultrasound"; "CT scan"; "MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan"; "PET (position emission tomography) scan."

How can I reduce my risk?

"Reduce your risk by stopping smoking, reducing the amount of alcohol you drink and maintaining a healthy diet and weight." The Department also notes that quitting smoking or vaping "reduces the risk of developing gum disease and mouth cancer", and points to Quitline for help.

Related services and further reading

Dental check-up

How often do I need a dental check-up?

How does smoking affect your oral health?

Mouth ulcers: what could be the cause?

Oral and maxillofacial surgery

Specialist care

6 questions often asked of dentists

5 tips for a healthier smile

How can we help?

If you have noticed a change in your mouth, or you are due for a check-up, call 13 13 16 or book online at your nearest Core Dental clinic. Please tell us about anything that has not healed in three weeks. You can also read our general dentistry page or what to expect at your first Core Dental appointment .

Core Dental at a glance

Nine Core Dental clinics across Melbourne: Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, Berwick, Bayside and Glenferrie.

Open six days a week: Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings.

We quote before treatment starts and offer interest-free payment plans, with HICAPS on-site claiming. Call 13 13 16 or book online.

Contact Core Dental

Phone	13 13 16
Booking	Online via coredental.com.au, or call 13 13 16
Hours	Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 1.30pm (Bayside Saturday 8.30am to 1.30pm), Sunday closed
Clinics	Southbank , South Melbourne , Caroline Springs , Carrum Downs , Epping , Wyndham , Berwick , Bayside , Glenferrie

Results, recovery times and potential risks vary for each individual. This information is general in nature and is intended for people over 18. Seek advice from a qualified, AHPRA-registered practitioner before proceeding.

Which parts of the mouth can oral cancer affect?

Mouth cancer, also called oral cancer, is a disease that can affect any part of the mouth, including the tongue, lips, floor of the mouth and gums. Core Dental dentists look for early signs at every check-up.

Which factors are linked to the development of mouth cancer?

Recognised risk factors include smoking, heavy alcohol use, human papillomavirus (HPV) infection and sun damage on the lips. Core Dental dentists may ask about these so they can tailor the checks and advice they give you.

What are the warning signs of mouth cancer?

Warning signs include white or red patches, an ulcer that does not heal, a lump, unexplained bleeding, pain or numbness, difficulty chewing or swallowing, loose teeth and swelling. Contact Core Dental if you notice any of these.

How long can a mouth ulcer last before it needs checking?

An ulcer that has not healed after three weeks should be checked by a dentist or doctor. Core Dental can examine it and refer you for further assessment if needed.

Does Core Dental screen for oral cancer?

Yes. During a routine examination our dentists look inside the mouth and examine the throat and neck for lumps, patches or swellings, and refer you to a doctor or specialist if something needs further investigation.

Can HPV cause cancers in the mouth and throat?

Some HPV types can cause oropharyngeal cancer at the base of the tongue, soft palate, tonsils and back of the throat. Most people with HPV do not develop cancer. Ask your doctor about vaccination.

How do I book a check-up at Core Dental?

Call Core Dental on 13 13 16 or book online through coredental.com.au. We are open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm and Saturday mornings, with nine clinics across Melbourne.