



What is Oral Cancer?

There are many types of oral cancer, affecting different parts of the mouth. The commonest site is the side of the tongue, but cancers can also occur anywhere in the mouth: on or under the tongue, on the floor or roof of the mouth, behind the teeth, on the gums or inside the cheek. Oral cancer accounts for about 1% of all cancers in the UK, and is a serious disease, killing around 4 people every day. About 3400 new cases are reported every year and this figure is rising.

What Causes It?

The most commonest risk factors for mouth cancer are smoking or chewing tobacco and heavy drinking. Some other possible causes include persistent Candida (yeast) infections of the mouth, viruses, immune deficiency disease, long-standing dental trauma or infection, sunlight or radiation (particularly for cancer of the lip), dietary deficiencies or anaemia. If severe, the cancer can spread and prove fatal.

Who Gets It?

In the past, oral cancer has usually affected older people, particularly men, but younger people and women are now increasingly being seen with the disease. People from ethnic minority groups who chew paan or betel quid are also at risk.

What Are The Symptoms?

Reddish or whitish pre-cancerous patches are the usual early signs of oral cancer, or a mouth ulcer that does not clear up.

Can It Be Cured?

Oral cancer is curable, but small cancers are much more treatable than large ones. It is very important that the cancer is diagnosed and treated early before it spreads. Treatment is usually by radiotherapy or surgery, and mouth reconstruction may be needed if the cancer is extensive.

What Can Your Dentist Do?

At each dental check-up, your dentist will check your whole mouth, not just your teeth, looking for signs of cancer or other diseases of the mouth. Special mouth-rinses are becoming available which may reveal signs of oral cancer that are invisible to the eye. The government is keen to encourage regular screening for oral cancer for those at risk.

What Can You Do?

The most important thing you can do is to visit your dentist regularly, in order that any signs of cancer can be detected early. Don't delay seeking advice if you have a sore in your mouth for over 2 weeks or a persistent lump that will not heal. It may well not be cancerous, but a check-up will enable the dentist to assess whether the problem needs investigating. The British Dental Association had calculated that if cancers are detected early, the chance of surviving for 5 years or more is around 80%, compared with the average of 50%.