

Mouth Cancer

To book an appointment at Avondale house Dental Surgery as either an existing or new patient please give our reception team a call on **01889 582 080** or visit our website to book your appointment online.

Introduction

Mouth cancer, also known as oral cancer, is where a tumor develops on the surface of the tongue, mouth, lips or gums. Whilst cancer of the mouth is rare it is important to have regular dental examinations if you have any concerns contact your dentist at the earliest opportunity.

Tumors can also occur in the salivary glands, tonsils and the pharynx (the part of the throat from your mouth to your windpipe) but these are less common.

Symptoms of mouth cancer include:

- red or white patches on the lining of your mouth or tongue
- ulcers
- a lump

See your GP if these symptoms do not heal within three weeks, especially if you're a heavy drinker or smoker.

Types of mouth cancer

A cancer that develops on the inside or outside layer of the body is called a carcinoma and these types of cancer are categorized by the type of cells the cancer starts in.

Squamous cell carcinoma is the most common type of mouth cancer, accounting for nine out of 10 cases. Squamous cells are found in many places around the body, including the inside of the mouth and under the skin.

Less common types of mouth cancer include:

- **oral malignant melanoma** – where the cancer starts in cells called melanocytes, which help give skin its colour
- **adenocarcinomas** – cancers that develop inside the salivary glands

What causes mouth cancer?

Mouth cancer occurs when something goes wrong with the normal cell lifecycle, causing them to grow and reproduce uncontrollably.

Risk factors for developing mouth cancer include:

- smoking or using products that contain tobacco
- drinking alcohol – smokers who are also heavy drinkers have a much higher risk compared to the population at large
- infection with the human papilloma virus (HPV), the virus that causes genital warts

Who is affected by mouth cancer?

Mouth cancer is an uncommon type of cancer, accounting for one in 50 of all cancer cases.

In the UK, just over 6,767 new cases of mouth cancer were diagnosed in 2011 (the latest reliable data).

Most cases of mouth cancer first develop in older adults who are between 50-74 years of age.

Mouth cancer can occur in younger adults, but it's thought that HPV infection may be responsible for the majority of cases that occur in younger people.

Mouth cancer is more common in men than in women. This is thought to be due to the fact that, on average, men drink more alcohol than women.

Treating mouth cancer

There are three main treatment options for mouth cancer. They are:

- **surgery** – where the cancerous cells are surgically removed and, in some cases, some of the surrounding tissue
- **chemotherapy** – where powerful medications are used to kill cancerous cells
- **radiotherapy** – where high energy X-rays are used to kill cancerous cells

These treatments are often used in combination. For example, a course of radiotherapy and chemotherapy may be given after surgery to help prevent the cancer returning.

Complications of mouth cancer

Both surgery and radiotherapy can make speaking and swallowing difficult (dysphagia).

Dysphagia can be a potentially serious problem. If small pieces of food enter your airways and become lodged in your lungs, it could trigger a chest infection, known as aspiration pneumonia.

Reducing the risk

The three most effective ways to prevent mouth cancer from developing – or prevent it reoccurring after successful treatment – are:

- not smoking
- keeping to the recommended weekly limits for alcohol consumption (21 units for men and 14 units for women (read more about alcohol units))
- eating a 'Mediterranean-style diet', with plenty of fresh vegetables (particularly tomatoes), citrus fruits, olive oil and fish (read more about healthy eating)

It's also important that you have regular dental check-ups because dentists can often spot the early stages of mouth cancer.

Outlook

If mouth cancer is diagnosed early, a complete cure is often possible using a combination of radiotherapy, chemotherapy and surgery.

The outlook for mouth cancer can vary depending on which part of the mouth is affected and whether it has spread from the mouth into surrounding tissue. The outlook is much better if the cancer is diagnosed early.

Overall, an estimated 40% of people with cancer affecting the mouth and pharynx will live at least five years after their diagnosis and many people live much longer. However, the outlook is better for cancer affecting certain areas of the mouth, such as the lip, tongue or oral cavity.

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