

## Mouth and Throat Cancer

### What exactly is mouth and throat cancer?

Cancer is a disease of the body's cells. Our bodies regularly produce new cells to repair after injury, for growth and to replace old worn-out cells. This process is controlled by the DNA of the cells. Research suggests that chemicals in tobacco damage the DNA of cells, interfering with the cells' instructions for repair and growth.<sup>1</sup> These damaged cells may multiply and develop into a malignant (cancerous) or benign (non-cancerous) tumour.

Any part of the mouth, nose and throat can be affected by cancer. It may start in the cells that form the lining of the mouth, nose, throat or voice box or in the thyroid or salivary glands.<sup>2</sup> If a cancer that develops in the mouth, nose or throat is left untreated, it can spread to surrounding tissue and other parts of the body.<sup>2</sup> Mouth and throat cancers generally spread to other parts of the body slowly. Advanced cancers of the mouth and throat can cause chronic pain, loss of function and disfigurement.

### Can smoking really lead to mouth and throat cancer?

Yes. The mouth and throat are used for breathing, talking, eating, chewing and swallowing. People who smoke expose their mouth to the 4,000 chemicals found in tobacco smoke.<sup>3</sup>

Smoking is a major cause of cancer affecting the mouth (oral cavity) and the throat (pharynx). Cancers of the mouth include tumours of the cheek, gum, tongue, lip, and the roof, floor and lining of the mouth. Cancers of the throat include tumours in the area behind the nose and mouth that connects to the oesophagus eg. the base (back third) of the tongue, tonsil, soft palate, the walls of the throat.<sup>4</sup>

52% of mouth and throat cancers in males and 42% of these cancers in females are attributed to tobacco use.<sup>5</sup> The risk of developing mouth cancer increases with the length of time a person has smoked and the amount they smoke.<sup>6</sup>

### Smoking is not the only thing that causes mouth and throat cancer, is it?

No, heavy alcohol use is also a major risk factor for mouth and throat cancer<sup>7</sup> and when combined, tobacco and alcohol account for most cases of mouth and throat cancer.<sup>8</sup>

Cancer of the lip may also be caused by over-exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun and cancers of the nose have been linked to inhaling chemicals such as hardwood dusts.<sup>2</sup>

### Facts

- In Australia, 2,052 Australians died from mouth and throat cancer in 2003<sup>9</sup>.
- In NSW, 517 people were diagnosed with mouth and throat cancer, and 235 died from the disease in 2003.<sup>7</sup>
- Someone who has ever smoked is up to nine times as likely as a non-smoker to develop one of these cancers.
- Smokers of one pack a day are 16 times more likely than non-smokers to develop cancer of the larynx.<sup>10</sup>
- Stopping smoking halves the risk of mouth and throat cancers within five years and the risk continues to decline over time.<sup>11</sup>
- After ten years, the risk of mouth and throat cancer is similar to someone who has never smoked.

## What are the symptoms?

There are a number of symptoms that may indicate cancer of the mouth or throat however these can also be caused by other less serious problems. If any of the following symptoms persist, they could indicate possible cancer of the mouth and throat:<sup>2</sup>

- a sore in the mouth that does not heal
- swelling or a lump in the mouth or neck
- persistent blocked nose, earache, cough or sore throat
- white patch on tongue, gum or lining of mouth (leukoplakia)
- red patch on tongue, gum or lining of mouth (erythroplakia)
- blood stained mucus or sputum
- changes in voice such as hoarseness
- pain in mouth or throat
- difficulty moving tongue, jaw, chewing or swallowing
- swollen lymph nodes in the neck

## How is mouth and throat cancer treated and can it be cured?

Treatment of mouth and throat cancer may involve surgery to remove the cancer, radiotherapy, chemotherapy or a combination of all three treatments. Cancers in the mouth are generally treated with surgery, and may involved radiotherapy with or without chemotherapy after the operation. Cancers of the throat and voice box may be treated by surgery or radiotherapy with or without chemotherapy.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the surgery is to remove the cancer and in some cases where the cancer is detected early, only a small area may need to be removed.<sup>2</sup>

## Thinking of quitting?

The Quitline **13 QUIT (13 7848)** is a confidential telephone based service designed to help smokers quit smoking and is funded by the Cancer Institute NSW. Quitline advisors are specialists who have been trained in health, education, psychology and smoking cessation. They know the health effects of smoking, understand the quitting process and are aware of the difficulties many smokers face in quitting. They are friendly, helpful, non-judgmental and able to assist you at whatever stage you are at in the quitting process.

**Call Quitline today on**

**13 QUIT (13 7848).**

*After diagnoses with mouth or throat cancer, 53% of men and 61% of women in NSW are still alive after five years.<sup>12</sup> Early detection significantly increases the chances of survival.*

## Sources

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