Mouth cancer can develop in any part of the mouth including the tongue, gums, lining of the mouth and lips. It is more common in men than in women and is rare in people under 40. It's not one of the most common cancers, but is an important cause of illness and death.

Our habits and lifestyle can have a big effect on our risk of mouth cancer. Most cases could be completely avoided! If cancer does develop and is found early, there is a very good chance of a cure.

What causes it?

The most important causes of mouth cancer are:

- smoking tobacco (cigarettes, cigars and pipes)
- chewing tobacco or betel quid with tobacco
- regularly drinking more than safe levels of alcohol

No more than 2 units of alcohol a day for women and 3 for men. One unit of alcohol is equivalent to a small glass of wine, or half a pint of beer. A standard pub measure of spirits contains around 1 1/2 units.

People who use tobacco and drink too much alcohol have the highest risk of mouth cancer. Three-quarters of mouth cancers are caused this way.

If you stop using tobacco – even after many years of use – you can greatly reduce your risk of mouth cancer.

If you chew paan, choose a brand without tobacco or betel nut added to the mix.

Early detection saves lives

If mouth cancer starts to develop, it's important to spot the changes quickly. Early treatment is simpler and more effective and many people can be cured. But the early signs of mouth cancer are often missed or ignored and people visit the dentist or doctor too late.

Your dentist can help

Dentists have special training to help them identify health problems and are often the first to spot mouth cancers in their patients. As part of a regular examination, dentists check for the early warning signs of mouth cancer. They will refer patients with suspect changes to hospital for further tests.

If you are over 40, smoke or chew tobacco and drink alcohol, ask your dentist to check your mouth once a year. It's important to visit the dentist regularly even if you no longer have your own teeth.

Signs and symptoms

Look out for the warning signs...

From time to time, spend a few moments in front of the mirror checking your mouth for any of the changes listed below. A small dentist's mirror may help you. But remember your dentist can easily check the parts you can't see.

- a sore or ulcer anywhere in the mouth that does not heal
- a white or red patch in the mouth that will not go away
- a lump or thickening on the lip or in the mouth or throat

Do you have any other unusual symptoms?

For example...

- difficulty or pain with chewing or swallowing
- a sore throat that does not get better
- a feeling that something is caught in the throat
- new pain in the tongue or ear that persists
- unusual bleeding or numbness in the mouth

If you notice any of these changes tell your dentist or doctor without delay. The change may not be caused by cancer but should always be investigated.
Reduce your risk

Changes in your mouth
Check your mouth for the changes listed inside this leaflet. Report unusual signs and symptoms to your dentist or doctor without delay. Visit your dentist regularly – at least once a year.

Tobacco
The best thing is to stop smoking or chewing tobacco completely. Help is available – talk to your doctor or call the Quitline on 0800 00 22 00. Nicotine replacement products help many people to quit. You can buy them at your local chemist, or ask your doctor if you can have them on prescription.

Alcohol
Keep within the safe limits for alcohol – no more than 2 units a day for women and 3 for men. If you feel you are drinking too much, ask your doctor for advice.

Healthy eating
Eat at least five different portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Try to increase the amount of red, yellow and orange fruit, salads and green vegetables in your diet.

Examples of a typical portion
An orange; two kiwi fruit or tangerines; a cupful of grapes or strawberries; two serving spoonfuls of broccoli or carrots; a bowlful of salad. Beans, peas and lentils count as portions but potatoes and nuts don’t. One or more glasses of fruit juice also count as one portion.

Further information

Freephone helplines for people who want to stop smoking or chewing tobacco...

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quitline (UK)</th>
<th>0800 00 22 00</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NHS, England and Wales</td>
<td>0800 169 0169</td>
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<td>NHS, Scotland and N Ireland</td>
<td>0800 848 464</td>
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Information is also available in the following languages

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<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Quitline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>0800 00 22 44</td>
<td>0800 169 0885</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gujarati</td>
<td>0800 00 22 55</td>
<td>0800 169 0884</td>
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<td>Hindi</td>
<td>0800 00 22 66</td>
<td>0800 169 0883</td>
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<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>0800 00 22 77</td>
<td>0800 169 0882</td>
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<td>Urdu</td>
<td>0800 00 22 88</td>
<td>0800 169 0881</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkish &amp; Kurdish</td>
<td>0800 00 22 99</td>
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For more about cancer visit our patient information website www.cancerhelp.org.uk and search under mouth cancer.

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our Information nurses. Direct line 020 7061 8355 or freephone 0800 (CANCER) 226237 or email cancer.info@cancer.org.uk

Order copies of this and other cancer awareness leaflets online at www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets or call 020 7061 8333.

About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the leading charity dedicated to research on the causes, treatment and prevention of cancer:

www.cancerresearchuk.org
www.cancerhelp.org.uk

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