



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL
ASSOCIATION INC.

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ORAL CANCERS – HOW TO MINIMISE YOUR RISKS

Each and every day at least three Australians are being diagnosed with oral cancer. Despite advances in the treatment of oral cancers, the survival rate remains low because these cancers are often detected when they are quite advanced. Recognising the symptoms of oral and lip cancers early is paramount to successful treatment.

Factors that can increase your risk of oral and lip cancers include:

Smoking

Smoking increases your risk of oral cancers. More than 80% of oral cancers in Australia occur in people who smoke.ⁱ

Alcohol

Heavy drinking, defined as more than four standard drinks on a single occasionⁱⁱ, increases your risk of mouth cancers. Smoking and alcohol are important risk factors and when combined together can further increase a person's likelihood of developing oral cancer.

Sun exposure

Extended sun exposure to any part of your body, including your lips, without broad spectrum sun protection factor (SPF) protection can increase your risk of skin cancer. Known as squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), this form of skin cancer can appear on parts of the body that are most exposed to the sun, such as your lips, and have a high risk of spreadingⁱⁱⁱ.

Diet

Eating a diet rich in fruit and vegetables can help to reduce the risk of developing cancer. Eating a minimum of eight serves of vegetables per week, compared to three or less, decreases the chance of mouth cancer by 50%^{iv}.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Young people are now being diagnosed with oral cancers linked to the human papilloma virus (HPV), the virus known to cause genital warts and cervical cancer. Research suggests that HPV transferred from the genital area to the mouth can increase your risk of oral cancer.

Researchers believe that the HPV vaccine may be the key to reducing oral squamous cell carcinoma cancers.

How can you reduce your risk of oral cancer?

1. Don't smoke. If you are a smoker, consider quitting. Talk to your dentist or doctor about how smoking affects your oral and general health
2. Drink alcohol in moderation. Don't underestimate your consumption – a 150ml glass of wine is 1.6 standard drinks, a 425ml bottle of full-strength beer equals 1.6 standard serves. Have regular alcohol free days
3. Protect your skin. Avoid getting sunburnt, apply broad spectrum sunscreen to any exposed skin including your lips or apply a lip balm with a high SPF rating. Wear a

hat when outdoors and if possible, avoid being outside in the middle of the day when UV rays are at their highest

4. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, particularly those high in antioxidants
5. Talk to your health professional about the HPV vaccination. The vaccination protects against the strains of HPV that can cause cervical cancer and may also protect against the types of oral cancers caused by the HPV
6. If you notice a spot or sore on your lip or in your mouth that looks unusual or doesn't heal, or if you have any numbness, pain or tenderness in your mouth, visit your dentist or doctor as soon as possible
7. Look after your teeth and mouth. Brush your teeth twice a day and floss daily
8. Have regular dental checkups. Your dentist should check not only your teeth, but also the rest of your mouth

For more information on oral cancers and looking after your mouth, visit www.dentalhealthweek.com.au

ⁱ S. Kleid, J. Frowen, *Mouth, nose & throat cancers*, Cancer Council Victoria Thursday 22 November 2007, http://www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/cancer_types/mouth_nose_and_throat_cancers

ⁱⁱ Australian Guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol, NHMRC, 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Cancer Council NSW, Skin cancer detection, diagnosis and treatment <http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/editorial.asp?pageid=1315>

^{iv} *Eur J Cancer Prev* 2003;12(1):49-56