

Introduction

Almost 5,500 new cases of mouth and throat cancers are reported in the UK each year. And while men are twice as likely to develop these cancers, there are now more cases amongst women than ever before. This could be because an increasing number of women are now smoking and drinking alcohol – these are the major causes of mouth and throat cancers. But by not smoking, moderating drinking habits, and eating at least five portions of vegetables and fruits a day, estimates suggest that as many as 75 per cent of mouth and throat cancers could be prevented each year.



What is cancer?

Cancer is a broad term used to describe over 200 diseases that affect specific organs and areas of the body. Simply speaking, it is a disease of cells, and every type of cancer starts in the same way. It begins when the genetic information in a single cell becomes damaged in some way and causes the cell to divide at an uncontrolled rate. The resulting group of cells forms a lump or swelling – which is usually referred to as a ‘tumour’. The tumour may then grow and go on to damage surrounding healthy tissues or organs, or cancer cells may break away from the original tumour and spread through the bloodstream or the lymphatic system to other parts of the body – a process known as ‘metastasis’.

What causes cancer?

The development of cancer is a complex biological process which is still not well understood. Thanks to scientific research, we do, however, have an increasing understanding of the factors which are involved in the cancer process. Hormones, immune conditions and inherited alterations in the genetic material of a cell can all play a part in cancer development. But we now know that environmental factors – particularly diet and lifestyle – have a significant influence on the development of cancer. Environmental factors include exposure to ‘toxins’ – such as tobacco and alcohol – unhealthy food choices, infectious agents – like bacteria and viruses – chemical agents and radiation. All of these can damage the programming and health of cells in the body and so encourage cancer growth.

Some aspects of our daily lifestyle choices can encourage the cancer process while others help protect against it. The aspects of lifestyle most likely to increase our risk include: unhealthy food choices, not being physically active, being overweight, drinking heavily and smoking tobacco.

Mouth and throat cancers

This is a broad term for cancers which begin at a number of different areas, or ‘sites’, within the body, including: the mouth, lips, gums, tongue, cheeks, palate, tonsils and pharynx (throat). Cancer of the larynx – more commonly known as the voicebox – is often grouped with these cancers.

Who is at risk from these types of cancers?

While the exact causes are not known, scientists do know that some groups of people have an increased risk of mouth and throat cancers. These include: ● Those aged 40 or over. ● Those who smoke or chew tobacco (or chew ‘gutka/paan’, a habit more common in Asian communities). ● Those who drink alcohol heavily* (particularly when those people also smoke). ● Those who have a history of leukoplakia (thickened white patches inside the mouth), commonly associated with heavy use of tobacco or alcohol. ● Those who have a history of erythroplakia (red patches on the surface of the mouth), occurring most often in people aged 60 and over. ● Those who have been over-exposed to ultraviolet (UV) rays (for example, people who work outside) – a high-risk group for lip and skin cancers. ● Those who consume a diet low in vegetables and fruits.

** For cancer prevention, WCRF UK recommends that alcohol should be avoided. For those who do drink: men should have less than two alcoholic drinks a day, women less than one.*

Helping prevent mouth and throat cancers

Tobacco use – which includes cigarette, cigar and pipe smoking and chewing tobacco – and **drinking heavily** are the two main factors known to increase your risk of mouth and throat cancers. People who smoke *and* drink heavily have a particularly high risk of these cancers (the harmful effects of each are heightened when combined). However, as soon as you stop smoking and moderate the amount you drink, your body begins to recover. If you



want to give up smoking, or would like to cut down on the amount of alcohol you drink, there are many sources of help. Ask your GP for advice or telephone a help line, such as the NHS Smoking Helpline (0800 169 0 169) or Drinkline (0800 917 8282).

Not enough people know that the food choices you make each day could also have a significant impact on your risk of developing cancer. Scientists have found convincing evidence to show that diets rich in **vegetables and fruits** can help to reduce the risk of mouth and throat cancers, possibly due to the **vitamin C** present in these foods. Foods high in this nutrient include: blackcurrants, oranges,

Steps to help reduce mouth and throat cancer risk

Smoking and drinking heavily are the overwhelming causes of mouth and throat cancers, particularly when combined



STEP ONE:

Do not smoke or use tobacco in any form

If you smoke, try to give up immediately. If you are a non-smoker, avoid passive smoke and strive for a smoke-free environment.



STEP TWO:

Drink alcohol in moderation, if at all

For drinkers: men should drink less than two alcoholic drinks a day, women less than one.



STEP THREE:

Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits

Try to eat at least five portions a day of a variety of vegetables and fruits, all year round.

AND REMEMBER:

Choose a diet rich in a variety of plant-based foods, maintain a healthy weight, be physically active, select foods low in fat and salt, and always prepare and store food safely.



nectarines, strawberries, kiwi fruit, spring greens, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage and tomatoes. Make sure that you eat these regularly as part of a balanced diet.

Many cases of lip cancer are triggered by **sun exposure**. If you work outside or live in a sunny climate, it's always important to protect yourself from UV rays. Use a strong sunscreen, a lip balm with built-in sunscreen, and also keep well covered.

Detecting mouth and throat cancers

Listed below are the most common symptoms of mouth and throat cancers. Most people with these symptoms will not have cancer – they are likely to be the result of other, less serious illnesses. Nevertheless, it's essential that you have them checked by your GP or dentist as soon as possible. Early detection and referral to a specialist can have a dramatic impact on the success of treatment. In general, the sooner that symptoms are reported, the better the outcome. Regular check-ups with your GP and dentist are essential (even if you have no teeth). Always make sure that your mouth and throat are given a thorough examination at these appointments. Some early-stage mouth cancers can be overlooked, even by trained professionals. So take a proactive role in your health. Once a month, you could check for any unusual lumps, sores or growths on your mouth or lips.

Signs and symptoms to look out for:

- An unusual white or red patch, ulcer or lump in the mouth, or on the gums or tongue, that does not heal within 3 weeks
- Unexplained bleeding, pain, tenderness or numbness in the mouth or lips
- A persistent swelling in the neck
- A sore throat, hoarse voice or persistent cough that does not improve after 6 weeks
- Difficulty or pain in chewing, swallowing or speaking
- Coughing up blood or blood-stained phlegm
- A change in the pitch of the voice – 'a husky voice'
- Persistent earache
- Unexplained weight loss



And, if you fall into one of the higher risk categories (see 'Who is at risk from these types of cancers?'), bring this to the attention of your GP or dentist.

Diagnosing mouth and throat cancers

After discussing your symptoms and examining you, your GP or dentist may arrange for you to see a doctor who specialises in mouth and throat disorders. You will then undergo one or more tests. Firstly, an **inspection** of the mouth and throat using a mirror. If a satisfactory view of the area cannot be obtained, the doctor may use a laryngoscope (an illuminated viewing instrument) to inspect the pharynx and larynx. During these procedures, a **biopsy** (a small sample of tissue) may be taken for microscopic examination. If a diagnosis of cancer is made, further tests may be carried out to assess the extent of the disease and to check whether it has spread elsewhere in the body. These may include: **routine blood tests** to check general health; **x-rays**; **CT scanning** (a computerised technique that produces two-dimensional images); **MRI scan** (uses magnetic waves to create high-quality images) and **bone scan**.

Treating mouth and throat cancers

The treatment used generally depends on the type of cancer, the size of the tumour and the patient's health. **Surgery** is often carried out to remove the tumour and some of the surrounding tissue and affected lymph glands.

Radiotherapy uses high-intensity x-rays to destroy cancer cells, or to shrink a tumour.

If the cancer has spread to other parts of the body (metastasised), **chemotherapy** (a specialised group of drugs that kill cancer cells) may be prescribed.

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Where to go next

World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF UK)

19 Harley Street, London W1G 9QJ. Tel: 020 7343 4200

For further information on choosing healthy diets and lifestyles to help reduce your risk of cancer.

Mouth Cancer Foundation (MCF)

PO Box 498, Wakefield WF1 9AW. Tel: 01924 950 950

A registered charity established for the relief of sickness and the promotion and protection of good health among those suffering or at risk of mouth, throat and other head and neck cancers.

Please visit www.mouthcancerfoundation.org or email info@mouthcancerfoundation.org for further information and online support.



Work of World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF UK)

WCRF UK is the principal UK charity dedicated to the prevention of cancer through the promotion of healthy diet and nutrition, physical activity and weight management. WCRF UK is committed to providing cancer research and education programmes which expand our understanding of the importance of our food and lifestyle choices in the cancer process. By spreading the good news that cancer can be prevented, WCRF UK hopes that many thousands of lives will be saved. The education and research programmes of WCRF UK are funded almost entirely by donations from the public.

This booklet gives information on the WCRF UK Diet and Health Guidelines for Cancer Prevention. These guidelines were developed from WCRF/AICR's landmark report: *Food, Nutrition and the Prevention of Cancer: a global perspective* (1997). This report reviewed thousands of leading research studies from around the world and led to a set of clear guidelines for members of the public to follow. Since then, a great deal of new evidence has accumulated and WCRF/AICR are working on the production of a second report, due to be published in 2007.

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"Stopping cancer before it starts"

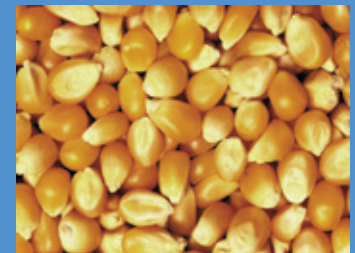
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REDUCING YOUR RISK OF

MOUTH & THROAT CANCERS



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