

# Joehassin Cordero, M.D., FACS

## What is oral cancer?

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Oral cancer is a condition that affects the lining inside of our mouth. Usually the biggest risk factors that we face are secondary to heavy smoking and alcohol. But nowadays, we're also having a significant of people who get it from human papilloma virus, or HPV that is the same one as the cervical cancer, that can actually lead to cancer in the oral cavity.

## What are symptoms people can look for?

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In oral cancer, we see people who have white patches, red patches, ulcers and when they're associated with significant amount of pain that and I'm talking pain for three to four weeks that doesn't seem to get any better. That's when we seek that we want some help. Also, people with HPV may have an asymmetric tonsillar means may have a bigger tonsil in one side or the other, or they may have a neck mass. So and with that people will have difficulty swallowing, they may have difficulties chewing, they may have difficulty speaking. And they may have some time, even ear pain because the same nerve that innervates the back of the throat, send couple branches to the ear. So it's not uncommon for people with a tonsillar cancer to have ear pain.

## Are certain demographics more likely to have oral cancer?

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What we're seeing right now is most of the affected people who smoke or drink are older, because they've been smoking for 20-30 years. But what we're seeing a new trend with people in their 30s 40s and 50s with the HPV type of virus cancer, that the only presentation would be a neck mass, no associated pain, no difficulties well and they just have a neck mass. We do a fine needle, the fine needle shows cancer and then we start working out the patient. Most of those patients will have cancer in the tonsil or in the base of the tongue.

## Can kids develop oral cancer?

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No. Very unlikely, my youngest patient who was 17 but he developed a cancer because he used to use mouthwash severely almost 12 times a day. So when you have something that is going to give chronic inflammation, such as alcohol that will lead to a cancer.

## Are canker sores dangerous?

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Canker sores, you know if they happen to be on and off, which most of the canker sores are, they may last you up to a month and people who have immunosuppression such that during chemotherapy or so that they develop a condition called mucositis. That will lead to canker sores in their mouth. And this will last a little while. But when I'm talking when they have a canker sore or ulcerative process that doesn't seem to be getting any better after a few weeks, that's what we should seek help.

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## How can regular dental checkups help prevent oral cancer?

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Going to your dentist on a regular basis, including every six months, you know, for the dental cleaning, helps the dentist keep up with anything that may look abnormal. So if you have a lesion of a bump inside of your mouth, that is peculiar, you keep on playing with it. Sometimes it's good to have the doctor see it, I pick up a few melanomas, which is a black spot inside of your mouth that the person kept thinking, oh it just might be a stain from me chewing, and it turned out to be a melanoma and it was picked up by a dentist. So sometimes I highly recommend that you see the dentist on a regular basis.

## How can things like smoking cause oral cancer?

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It's just the constant chronic use of the smoking and when we think about it, it's not so much that the smoking itself is the only reason. But most people who smoke tend to do other things that may cause inflammation inside of your mouth. Because they tend to what, they tend to heavy drink too, or they tend to consume things in addition. Like the kid who had a cancer from their mouthwash, I have ladies with dentures that they're not fixed and they constantly keep on moving causing inflammation and developing cancer from your dentures.

## What are some examples of things that can lead to oral cancer?

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Anything that cause a chronic inflammation, whether you're suffering from a chronic illness, you know, may have diabetes, whatever it may be, thinks that chronic use of a mouthwash, chronic use of you know anything in your mouth, like in India they use they chew up not called betel nut that can actually lead to cancer of the oral cavity it is very common in in India. We don't see it here in the United States, but anything that causes a chronic inflammation to the lining of their mouth is a risk for developing oral cancer.

## Why is it important to see your doctor as soon as you suspect symptoms?

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Unfortunately, most of the oral cavity today is diagnosed late in the in the pathway. So you should think about stage 1,2,3 and 4, with a for being somewhere else in your body metastasized to the rest of your body. And most of the people that we see because they keep on thinking, Oh, it's just gonna go away. It's just going to go away. They present with a stage four cancer that means they have a big ulcer in the side of the mouth, and they have a big neck mass. That's what we typically see with somebody with a head and neck cancer. They keep on thinking even now after having a mass for three months, they keep on thinking Oh, just gonna go away, it just must be a reactive lymph node, they get antibiotics, they get a little better get antibiotics, they don't get any better, and then they don't go and seek any further help.

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## How quickly can oral cancer spread?

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The majority of the oral cancer starts in the lining your mouth or your tonsil and your base of the tongue. And from there, it spreads to the lymph nodes in your neck and most of the lymph nodes you think about, they're only a few millimeters, but they start getting bigger. And when they get to about two centimeters, that's when we first can palpate it. So you think about something about that big before you can palpate it. And by that time we already spread. So if we can, if something is not healing, any squatting in neck mass, definitely we should seek help.

## How is oral cancer treated?

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Right now, the treatment of choice that we have right now is, initially we want to do surgery. If there is a mass or lesion, we want to cut it out, we want to get clear margins. And from there, if you have spread to the lymph nodes, even before we having spread, we want to get a CAT scan, just to make sure you haven't spread. Sometime we do a prophylactic neck, lymph node dissection, that means we remove the lymph nodes. Sometimes, if there is a mass, we are going to remove all the lymph nodes that are involved. After that, we refer the patient to the oncologist to decide whether we're going to do any chemo or any radiation or just radiation alone. So that my usual patient will have a resection followed by radiation.

## Are there any self-checks for oral cancer?

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The majority of the time we all can feel and look in the mirror most of the time when I see a patient that presents to me with a neck mass. They say, Well, I was shaving, and then I noticed it, or I went to a party and my friends say what is that in your neck and we have heard of multiple weathermen that were told hey you better go check it because their thyroid got enlarged or they have a mass in the neck that they weren't looking at. So sometimes something that you can actually palpate. So if you think that you have a mass that wasn't there before I recommend that we seek help.

## Is lip cancer a part of oral cancer?

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Lip cancer can be part of oral cancer but because its arterial is considered a skin and most of the malignancies of the lip cancer secondary to people who smoke because of the constant carcinogens there are also the sun. So we see a lot of people who are farmers who are work outside who get the lip cancer, especially the lower cancer because the direct sun exposure.

## How are they differentiated?

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An oral cancer is considered anything behind the vermilion border so right here, from there on is considered oral cancer for and from there forward it's your lip cancer.

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Anything else to add?

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It's something to think about something to talk about. Is that in spite of everything that we do, no matter what stage of the disease. Almost 40% of the people will not survive five years. No matter what we do.