

# Mouth, Head & Neck Cancers

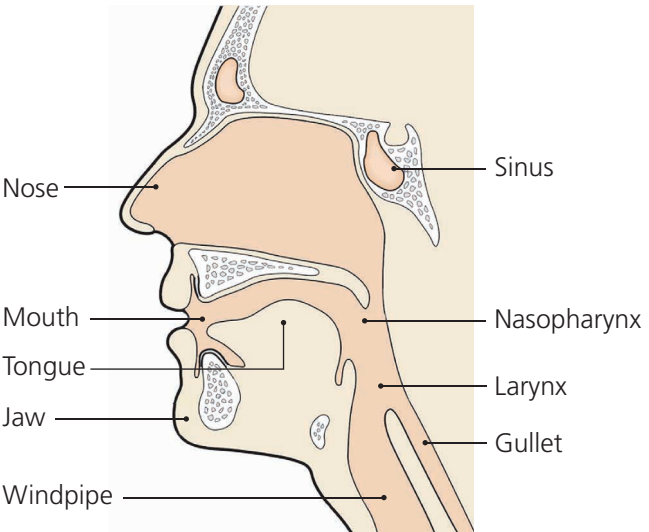
What you should know



**Irish  
Cancer  
Society**

# What is mouth, head and neck cancer?

Mouth, head and neck cancer is a term used to describe different types of cancer that can affect your lips, gums, cheeks, tongue, palate, tonsil, throat, salivary glands, sinuses, nose and voice box (larynx). Mouth, head and neck cancers happen when normal cells grow in an abnormal way to form a mass of cells called a tumour in the tissues of your head or neck.



## What increases my risk of mouth, head and neck cancers?



**Smoking:** If you smoke, you are more at risk of developing cancer of the mouth, tonsil, throat, larynx or lung. Pipe smokers have an increased risk of lip cancer. If you chew tobacco, you have a higher risk of developing mouth cancers. All types of tobacco use increase your risk of mouth, head and neck cancer. There is no safe use of tobacco.



**Age:** Your risk increases as you get older. While these cancers are more common in people over 50 years of age, they are increasing in people under 50.



**Gender:** These cancers are more common in men than women, but rates in women are rising.



**Alcohol:** If you drink a lot of alcohol (more than 10 standard drinks per week), particularly spirits, you are 40 times more likely to develop a head and neck cancer. If you smoke and drink alcohol, the risk could be up to 200 times higher.



**Other risk factors:** Sun exposure increases your risk of cancer of the ear, nose and lip. Exposure to chemicals and dusts in the workplace is linked to throat cancer. The Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infection can increase the risk of cancers in the tongue, tonsil, soft palate and throat.

**Risk factors increase your chance of getting mouth, head and neck cancers. Having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get these cancers. Sometimes people with no risk factors may get the disease.**



**If you are diagnosed with cancer, our booklets have more information.**



## What are the symptoms of mouth, head and neck cancers?

The symptoms of mouth, head and neck cancers depend on where the tumour is found. Symptoms can include:

- A sore or ulcer in your mouth that does not heal within three weeks
- Difficulty or pain when chewing or swallowing
- Sore throat, difficulty speaking, or having a hoarse voice
- An unexplained loose tooth
- A swelling or lump in the mouth or neck
- Pain in the face or jaw
- Earache, ringing in the ear or hearing problems
- Numbness of the tongue or face
- Blocked or bleeding nose
- White or red patches in the mouth lining or on the tongue that don't go away within three weeks.

**These symptoms can be caused by other things, but always get them checked out.**

# What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you have any symptoms or changes in your mouth, head or neck that you are worried about, it's important to have them checked by your GP (family doctor) or dentist. The chances are it will not be cancer. Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone's time. The sooner cancer is spotted, the more likely you are to recover from it.

## How are mouth, head and neck cancers diagnosed?

If your doctor thinks your symptoms need to be investigated, you will have more tests. Tests that can help to diagnose mouth, head and neck cancers include:



**Physical examination:** A specialist will inspect your mouth, throat, tongue, nose and neck for changes or lumps.



**Scopes:** The doctor puts a flexible tube with a light and a camera into your nose or throat to look for changes.



**Biopsy:** The specialist examines a sample of tissue taken from inside your body.

## How can I reduce my risk of mouth, head and neck cancers?



**Don't smoke:** By far the most important thing you can do to reduce your risk of these cancers is to stop smoking. Cigarettes, pipes, cigars, 'roll-ups' and low-tar cigarettes all increase the risk.



**Stay within the low-risk alcohol guidelines:** No more than 17 standard drinks (11 for women) spread out over the week, with 2-3 alcohol-free days. Don't binge drink.



**Protect your skin:** Use sunscreen with SPF 15 or higher (SPF 30 or higher for children), even on cool or cloudy days, and wear a lip balm that contains sunblock.



**Check your mouth and visit your dentist regularly:** Dentists are trained to examine the hard and soft tissues of the mouth and spot any changes.



**Tell your doctor about any changes that are not normal for you:** Talk to your doctor or dentist if you notice anything unusual, such as pain, unusual bleeding or new symptoms that don't clear up after three weeks.

See the end of this leaflet for tips on how to reduce your risk of cancer in general.

## Can I be screened for mouth, head and neck cancers?

Testing for cancer when you have no symptoms is called screening.

There is no mouth, head and neck cancer screening programme in Ireland at present, but many dentists provide mouth screening as part of a routine dental check-up.

If you are worried or feel you may be at risk, talk to your dentist or your GP without delay.

# 12 ways to reduce your cancer risk



**Do not smoke**



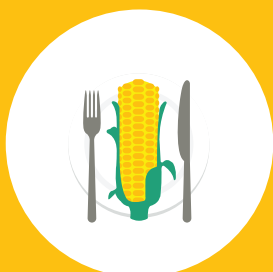
**Avoid second-hand smoke**



**Be a healthy weight**



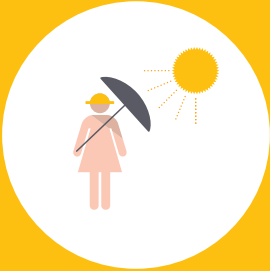
**Be physically active in everyday life**



**Have a healthy diet**



**Avoid alcohol**



**Avoid too much sun**



**Avoid pollutants**



**Get screened for cancer**



**Breastfeed your baby /  
Limit HRT**



**Get vaccinations -  
Hepatitis B for  
babies / HPV for girls**



**Find out if you are  
exposed to radon  
gas in your area**



# Some facts about mouth, head and neck cancers



The earlier they are diagnosed, the greater the chance that you will survive

**50+**

Mouth, head and neck cancers mainly affect people over the age of 50, but are becoming more common in younger people



Ear and eye cancers can also occur, but these are rare



## How common are mouth, head and neck cancers?

Mouth, head and neck cancers are not common. Around 600 people are diagnosed in Ireland every year.

# For more information...

If you are worried or have questions about mouth, head and neck cancers or any cancer...



**Call our Cancer Nurseline**

**Freephone 1800 200 700**



or email [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)

for confidential advice, support and information.

Visit our Daffodil Centres where our nurses can give you advice about healthy lifestyles and reducing your risk of cancer. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email [daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie](mailto:daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie)

Visit our website [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) for more information on mouth, head and neck cancers and ways to reduce your risk of cancer.

## Want to stop smoking?

Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do to reduce your risk of cancer.

If you would like advice or support on quitting, call the HSE Quit Team on CallSave **1800 201 203**, Freetext **QUIT** to **50100** or visit [www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie)