Guide to oral cancer

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What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer includes cancer of the oral cavity (cheeks, gums, roof and floor of the mouth), lips, tongue, salivary glands, and related areas (throat, tonsils). It is an abnormal swelling, lump, or ulcer originating from a single cell that grows and divides out of control because its genetic information has been damaged. The cancer may invade surrounding tissues, injure organs, and may spread to other parts of the body. Some fast facts:
- Oral cancer is the eighth most common cancer worldwide.
- In the United States, more than 30,000 new cases are diagnosed each year and, on average, one person dies from oral cancer every hour of every day of the year.
- In Hong Kong, new cases are diagnosed in 414 people each year (=5.3 per 100,000 population), and 161 people (=2.0 per 100,000) die each year from oral cancer.

Who is at risk of oral cancer?

Some groups are more at risk than others (eg men and people older than 40 years). In addition, known risk factors include:
- Smoking or chewing tobacco
- Heavy drinking (especially in combination with tobacco use)
- Overexposure to ultraviolet light and sunshine
- Poor nutrition
- Some infections
- Certain occupational exposures
- Immune deficiency

Detecting oral cancer early

Early signs of oral cancer are often painless and difficult to identify, but when found early enough, oral cancer has a high cure rate. See your dentist if you find any of the signs listed in the Box.

Your dental or medical provider can routinely perform a head and neck exam involving visual inspection and finger exploration of the gums, lips, all surfaces of the tongue, cheeks, roof and floor of the mouth, salivary glands, back of the throat, and lymph nodes. A tissue sample may be taken for testing, and further examinations (eg blood tests, X-rays, and special types of scanning) may need to be done.

Preventing oral cancer

- Do not smoke or use tobacco in any form, and avoid passive smoke. If you smoke, quit immediately: visit <www.tobaccocontrol.gov.hk> or call the Hong Kong Department of Health Smoking Cessation Hotline: 1833-183 (Press 1) for advice and support.
- Cut down on your alcohol intake.
- Have a balanced diet and eat plenty of fruits and vegetables every day, all year round.
- Avoid excessive sun exposure, and use a strong sunscreen and lip balm containing sunscreen.
- See your dentist for oral cancer screening and regular oral check-ups, even if you have no teeth.

Some signs of oral cancer

See your dentist immediately if you have any of these:
- A sore in the mouth that fails to heal
- A sore in the mouth that bleeds easily
- A white or red patch in the mouth that won’t go away
- Soreness, pain, tenderness, or numbness in the mouth, throat, or tongue
- A lump or thickening in the mouth, throat, or tongue
- A persistent swollen gland in the neck
- Coughing up blood or blood-stained phlegm
- Difficulty in chewing, swallowing, or speaking
- Persistent hoarseness or coughing


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