

# ASCO ANSWERS

## ORAL & OROPHARYNGEAL CANCER

### WHAT IS ORAL AND OROPHARYNGEAL CANCER?

Oral and oropharyngeal cancer begins when cells grow uncontrollably and form a tumor in the oral cavity (mouth and tongue) or oropharynx (middle of the throat). More than 90% of these tumors begin in the flat, squamous cells in the lining of the mouth and throat.

### WHAT ARE THE PARTS OF THE ORAL CAVITY AND OROPHARYNX?

The oral cavity includes the lips, the lining of the lips and cheeks, the upper and lower gums, the front two-thirds of the tongue, the floor of the mouth under the tongue, the roof of the mouth, and the area behind the wisdom teeth. The oropharynx includes the soft palate at the back of the mouth, the part of the throat behind the mouth, the base of the tongue, and the tonsils.

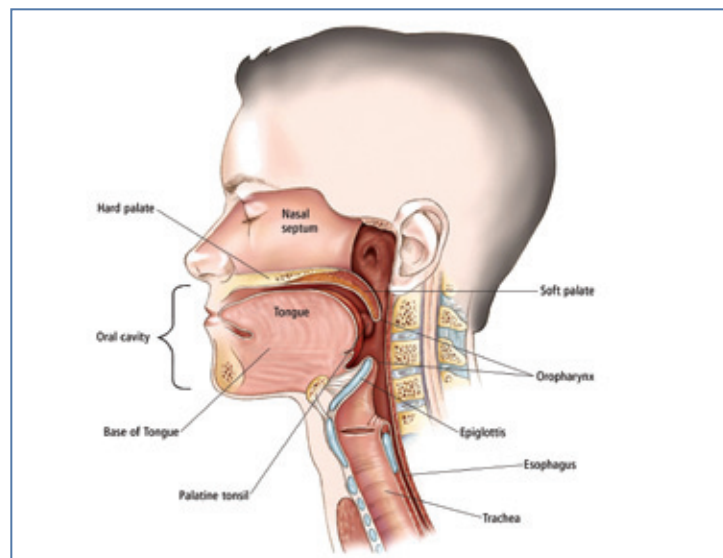


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*Find additional cancer information at [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net).*

### WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing a cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. There are five stages for oral and oropharyngeal cancer: stage 0 (zero) and stages I through IV (one through four). Illustrations for these stages are available at [www.cancer.net/oral](http://www.cancer.net/oral).

### HOW IS ORAL AND OROPHARYNGEAL CANCER TREATED?

The treatment of oral and oropharyngeal cancer depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. Oral and oropharyngeal cancer is typically curable, especially if found early. Three common treatment options are surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. When planning treatment, the doctor considers how treatment might affect how a person feels, looks, talks, eats, and breathes. During surgery, a surgeon removes the cancerous tumor and some of the healthy tissue around it. Radiation therapy may be the main treatment instead of surgery, or it may be used after surgery to treat small areas of cancer that could not be removed surgically. Chemotherapy may be used before or after surgery and is often combined with radiation therapy. The type of chemotherapy used may be targeted therapy (treatment that targets specific genes or proteins that contribute to cancer growth). When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of oral and oropharyngeal cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team.

### HOW CAN I COPE WITH ORAL OR OROPHARYNGEAL CANCER?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are other steps. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What type of oral or oropharyngeal cancer do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the oral or oropharyngeal cancer?
- Would you explain my treatment options? What clinical trials are open to me?
- What treatment do you recommend? Why?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- Should I see other specialists before treatment, such as a radiation oncologist, medical oncologist, plastic surgeon, oncologic dentist, or a speech pathologist?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to eat, swallow, or speak?



Learn more  
about oral and  
oropharyngeal  
cancer

- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at [www.cancer.net/oral](http://www.cancer.net/oral).

**Cancer.Net**™

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net), or call 888-651-3038.**

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

### Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

### Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

### Glossectomy:

Partial or total removal of the tongue

### Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

### Lumpectomy:

The removal of the tumor and area around the tumor

### Mandibulectomy:

Partial or total removal of the jaw

### Maxillectomy:

Partial or total removal of the hard palate

### Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

### Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer

### Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

### Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

### Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue