

Oral and Oropharyngeal Cancer - Overview [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 11/2013

ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about these diseases and the parts of the body they may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net's Guide to Oral and Oropharyngeal Cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen. Think of that menu as a roadmap to this full guide.

Cancer begins when normal cells change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass called a tumor. A tumor can be benign (noncancerous) or malignant (cancerous). Cancerous cells can invade nearby tissue and sometimes spread to other parts of the body through the bloodstream and the body's lymphatic system.

Two of the most common types of cancer that develop in the head and neck region are cancer of the oral cavity (mouth and tongue) and cancer of the oropharynx (the middle of the throat, from the tonsils to the tip of the voice box). The oral cavity includes the lips, buccal mucosa (lining of the lips and cheeks), gingiva (upper and lower gums), front two-thirds of the tongue, floor of the mouth under the tongue, hard palate (roof of the mouth), and the retromolar trigone (small area behind the wisdom teeth). The oropharynx begins where the oral cavity stops. It includes the soft palate at the back of the mouth, the part of the throat behind the mouth, the tonsils, and the base of the tongue. The oral cavity and oropharynx, along with other parts of the head and neck, contribute to our ability to chew, swallow, breathe, and talk.

More than 90% of oral and oropharyngeal cancers are squamous cell carcinoma, meaning they begin in the flat, squamous cells in the lining of the mouth and throat. The most common sites for cancer in the oral cavity are the tongue, tonsils, oropharynx, gums, and floor of the mouth.

Oral and oropharyngeal cancers are among the main types of cancer in the head and neck region, a grouping called [head and neck cancer](#) [3]. Although oral cancer and oropharyngeal cancer are commonly combined using one phrase, it is important to identify exactly where the cancer began because there are differences in treatment between the two locations.

Looking for More of an Overview?

If you would like additional introductory information, explore these related items. Please note these links take you to other sections on Cancer.Net:

- [ASCO Answers Fact Sheet](#) [4]: Read a one-page fact sheet (available in PDF) that offers an easy-to-print introduction to this type of cancer.
- [Cancer.Net En Español](#) [5]: Read about oral and oropharyngeal cancer in Spanish. [Infórmase sobre cáncer oral y orofaríngeo en español](#) [5].

To continue reading this guide, use the menu on the side of your screen to select another section.

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/oral-and-oropharyngeal-cancer/overview>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18909>

[4] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/asco_answers_oral.pdf

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/es/node/18191>