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## [Oral and Oropharyngeal Cancer - Risk Factors and Prevention](#) [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 01/2015

**ON THIS PAGE:** You will find out more about the factors that increase the chance of developing these types of head and neck cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of developing cancer. Although risk factors often influence the development of cancer, most do not directly cause cancer. Some people with several risk factors never develop cancer, while others with no known risk factors do. However, knowing your risk factors and talking about them with your doctor may help you make more informed lifestyle and health care choices.

Two factors that greatly increase the risk of oral and oropharyngeal cancer are:

**Tobacco** [3]. Using tobacco, including cigarettes, cigars, pipes, chewing tobacco, and snuff, is the single largest risk factor for head and neck cancer. Eighty-five percent (85%) of head and neck cancer is linked to tobacco use. Pipe smoking in particular has been linked to cancer in the part of the lips that touch the pipe stem. Chewing tobacco or snuff is associated with a 50% increase in the risk of developing cancer in the cheeks, gums, and inner surface of the lips where the tobacco has the most contact. [Secondhand smoke](#) [4] may also increase a person's risk of head and neck cancer.

**Alcohol** [5]. Frequent and heavy consumption of alcohol increases the risk of head and neck cancer, and using alcohol and tobacco together increases this risk even more.

Other factors that can raise a person's risk of developing oral and oropharyngeal cancer include:

**Prolonged sun exposure.** Excessive and unprotected exposure to the sun is linked with cancer in the lip area. To reduce your risk of lip cancer, decrease your exposure to sunlight and other sources of ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Read more about [protecting your skin from the sun](#) [6].

**Human papillomavirus (HPV).** Research indicates that infection with this virus is a risk factor for oral and oropharyngeal cancer. In fact, HPV-related oropharyngeal cancer in the tonsils and the base of the tongue has become more frequent in recent years. HPV is most commonly passed from person to person during sexual activity, including oral sex. There are different types, or strains, of HPV, and some strains are more strongly linked with certain types of cancers. HPV vaccines protect against specific strains of the virus.

To reduce your risk of HPV infection, limit your number of sexual partners because having many partners increases the risk of HPV infection. Using a condom cannot fully protect you from HPV during sex.

**Gender.** Men are more likely to develop oral and oropharyngeal cancer than women.

**Fair skin.** Fair skin is linked to a higher risk of lip cancer.

**Age.** People over 45 are at increased risk for oral cancer, although this type of cancer can develop in people of any age.

**Oral hygiene.** People with poor oral hygiene/dental care may have an increased risk of oral cavity cancer. Poor dental health or ongoing irritation from poorly fitting dentures, especially in people who use alcohol and tobacco products, may contribute to an increased risk of oral and oropharyngeal cancer. Regular examinations by a dentist can help detect oral cavity cancer and some oropharyngeal cancers at an early stage.

**Poor diet/nutrition.** A diet low in fruits and vegetables and a vitamin A deficiency increase the risk of oral and oropharyngeal cancer. Chewing betel nuts, a nut containing a mild stimulant that is popular in Asia, also raises a person's risk of developing oral and oropharyngeal cancer.

**Weakened immune system.** People with a weakened immune system have a higher risk of developing oral and oropharyngeal cancer.

**Marijuana use.** Recent studies have suggested that people who have used marijuana may be at higher than average risk for head and neck cancer.

## Prevention

Research continues to look into what factors cause this type of cancer and what people can do to lower their personal risk. There is no proven way to completely prevent this disease, but there

may be steps you can take to lower your cancer risk. Although some of the risk factors for oral and oropharyngeal cancer cannot be controlled, such as age, several can be avoided by making healthy lifestyle choices. [Stopping the use of all tobacco products](#) [7] is the most important thing a person can do to reduce the risk of oral and oropharyngeal cancer, even for people who have been using tobacco for many years.

Talk with your doctor if you have concerns about your personal risk of developing this type of cancer.

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### **Links**

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

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

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25002>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25004>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24981>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24659>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25003>