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Oral and Oropharyngeal Cancer - Symptoms and Signs

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], November / 2012

Symptoms and Signs

Often, a dentist is the first person to find this type of cancer during a routine examination. People with oral or oropharyngeal cancer may experience the following symptoms or signs. Sometimes, people with oral or oropharyngeal cancer do not show any of these symptoms. Or, these symptoms may be caused by a medical condition that is not cancer. If you are concerned about a symptom or sign on this list, please talk with your doctor.

- Sore in the mouth or on the lip that does not heal (the most common symptom)
- Red or white patch on the gums, tongue, tonsil, or lining of the mouth
- Lump on the lip, mouth, neck, or throat or feeling of thickening in the cheek
- Persistent sore throat or feeling that something is caught in the throat
- Hoarseness or change in voice
- Numbness of the mouth or tongue
- Pain or bleeding in the mouth
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, or moving the jaws or tongue
- Ear and/or jaw pain
- Chronic bad breath
- Changes in speech
- Loosening of teeth or toothache
- Dentures that no longer fit
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite, especially when prolonged; this may happen later in the course of the illness.

People who notice any of these warning signs should consult a doctor and/or dentist as soon as possible. When detected early, cancers of the oral cavity and oropharynx have a much better chance of cure.

Your doctor will ask you questions about the symptoms you are experiencing to help find out the cause of the problem, called a diagnosis [2]. This may include how long you?ve been experiencing the symptom(s) and how often.

If cancer is diagnosed, relieving symptoms and side effects remains an important part of cancer care and treatment. This may also be called symptom management, palliative care, or supportive care. Be sure to talk with your health care team about symptoms you experience, including any new symptoms or a change in symptoms.

Because many of the symptoms listed above can be caused by other, noncancerous health conditions, as well, it is important for people to receive regular health and dental screenings, especially those who routinely drink alcohol or currently use tobacco products or have used them in the past.

In fact, people who use alcohol and tobacco should receive a general screening examination at least once a year. This is a simple, quick procedure in which the doctor looks in the nose, mouth, and throat for abnormalities and feels for lumps in the neck. If anything unusual is found, the doctor will recommend a more extensive examination using one or more of the diagnostic procedures mentioned in the diagnosis [2] section.

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/19458