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Oral and Oropharyngeal Cancer - After Treatment [1]

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

ON THIS PAGE: You will read about your medical care after cancer treatment is finished and why this follow-up care is important. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

After treatment for oral or oropharyngeal cancer ends, talk with your doctor about developing a follow-up care plan. This plan may include regular physical examinations and/or medical tests to monitor your recovery for the coming months and years. ASCO offers [cancer treatment summary forms](#) [3] to help keep track of the cancer treatment you received and develop a survivorship care plan once treatment is completed.

People treated for oral or oropharyngeal cancer should receive regular follow-up medical and dental examinations to check for signs of recurrent cancer or a new type of cancer. Most recurrences of oral and oropharyngeal cancer happen within the first two to three years after diagnosis, so follow-up visits will be more frequent in the years immediately following treatment.

A common follow-up schedule is every two months for the first year, every four months for the second year, every six months for the third year, and once a year thereafter. If recurrent cancer is found, testing and treatment must begin again. If surgery or radiation therapy may have affected the person's thyroid gland, thyroid function tests should be part of follow-up care testing. [Special dental care](#) [4] may also be needed to manage or avoid long-term dental problems due to the cancer or its treatment.

People treated for oral and oropharyngeal cancer have a higher risk of developing secondary cancers. Researchers are evaluating the benefits of chemotherapy to prevent second cancers from developing, called [chemoprevention](#) [5].

If you smoke, it is important to be monitored for possible secondary cancers in the lung, esophagus, and head and neck, even without recurrence of the initial cancer. This is one of the reasons for medical follow-up. Joining a prevention clinical trial may also be an option.

[Rehabilitation](#) [6] is a major part of follow-up care after head and neck cancer treatment. People may need physical therapy and speech and swallowing therapy. Supportive care to manage symptoms and maintain nutrition during treatment may be recommended.

Depending on the size and location of the tumor and the type of cancer treatment selected, the abilities to chew and move the food through the mouth and pharynx to the stomach may be impaired. It is important for people who have been treated for oral or oropharyngeal cancer to continue to swallow their saliva and any food they can as much as possible, throughout their treatment, to prevent long-term swallowing problems. Special nutritional care and support is often needed during treatment and immediately following treatment while the body's reaction to the treatment, such as swelling of tissues, subsides. Some people may need to learn new ways to eat or prepare foods differently.

If the cancer treatment changes oral structures or limits their movement, speech will become more difficult to understand. Pre-treatment evaluation of speech and swallowing abilities is necessary to maximize post-treatment functioning and quality of life. Speech pathologists can assist people in regaining their normal functions, which becomes an important part of treatment planning and rehabilitation.

People may look different, feel tired, and be unable to talk or eat the way they did before treatment. They may experience swelling in the area, called [lymphedema](#) [7]. Many people experience depression. The health care team can help people adjust and connect them with both physical and emotional support services. Again, it is important that people meet with all members of the multidisciplinary team before their head and neck cancer treatment begins to reduce long-term problems.

People recovering from oral and oropharyngeal cancer are encouraged to follow established guidelines for good health, such as maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding all tobacco products, eating a balanced diet, and having recommended cancer screening tests. Talk with your doctor to develop a plan that is best for your needs. Moderate physical activity can help rebuild your strength and energy level. Your doctor can help you create an appropriate exercise plan based upon your needs, physical abilities, and fitness level. Learn more about the [next steps to take in survivorship](#) [8], including making [positive lifestyle changes](#) [9].

The next section offers a list of questions you may want to ask. Use the menu on the side of your screen to select Questions to Ask the Doctor, or you can select another section, to continue reading this guide.

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/oral-and-oropharyngeal-cancer/after-treatment>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25394>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24499>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24973>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25397>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25250>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/22>
- [9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24554>