

Oral & Oropharyngeal Cancer

What are oral and oropharyngeal cancers?

Oral and oropharyngeal cancers begin when healthy cells in the oral cavity or oropharynx change and grow out of control, forming a mass called a tumor. More than 90% of these tumors begin in the flat, squamous cells found 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.

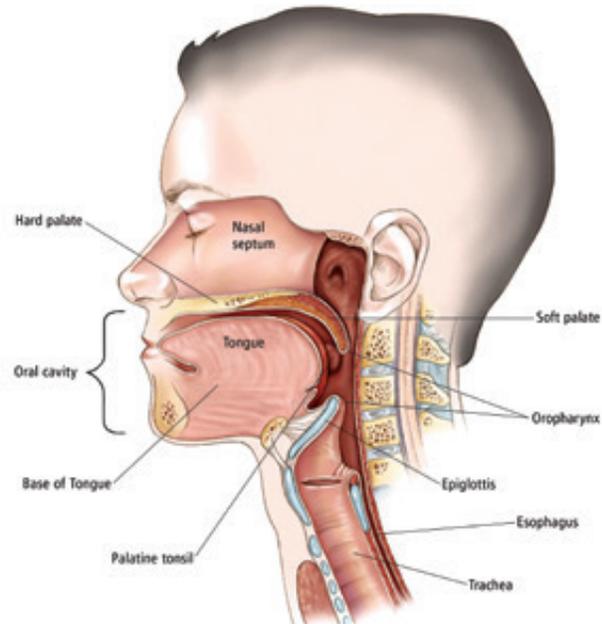


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What does stage mean?

The stage is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. There are 5 stages for oral and oropharyngeal cancers: stage 0 (zero) and stages I through IV (1 through 4). Find more information about these stages at www.cancer.net/oral.

How are oral and oropharyngeal cancers treated?

The treatment of an oral or oropharyngeal cancer depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. When planning treatment, the doctor also considers how treatment might affect the way a person feels, looks, talks, eats, and breathes. Oral and oropharyngeal cancers are often curable, especially if found early. Common treatment options are surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. During surgery, a surgeon removes the cancerous tumor and some of the healthy tissue around it. Radiation therapy may be recommended instead of surgery, or it may be used after surgery to treat small areas of cancer that could not be removed. Chemotherapy may be used before or after surgery and is often combined with radiation therapy. Targeted therapy may also be combined with radiation therapy. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of oral or oropharyngeal cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team. This is called palliative care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

How can I cope with oral or oropharyngeal cancer?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your health care team are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, organizing your health information, making sure all of your questions are answered, and participating in the decision-making process are other steps. Talk with your health care team about any concerns. 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 health care team:

- What type of oral or oropharyngeal cancer do I have? Where is the cancer located?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the oral or oropharyngeal cancer? What does this mean?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are available for me? Where are they located, and how do I find out more about them?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- 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, and/or 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?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs of cancer care, who can help me?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/oral.

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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

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Maxillofacial prosthodontist:

A doctor who specializes in restorative surgery of the head and neck

Metastasis:

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

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer

Otolaryngologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating problems with the ears, nose, and throat

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

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

Targeted therapy:

Treatment that targets specific genes or proteins that contribute to cancer growth

Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue

MADE AVAILABLE THROUGH

