

HPV and Oral Cancer

There are many known ways of reducing your risk of developing oral cancer, including avoiding cigarettes and tobacco products, alcohol, and overexposure to sunlight. But there are other lesser known risk factors associated with oral cancer, including human papillomavirus (HPV). Read on for more information about HPV and its link to oral cancer.

What is HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted disease in the world. There are more than 40 types of HPV, and approximately 20 million Americans ages 15 to 49 currently have one or more of the HPV strains. HPV will likely affect a majority of sexually active people at some point in their lifetime, though many HPV strains remain undetected and do not pose a serious health risk.

What are the oral signs of HPV?

HPV not only can infect your genital area, but also your mouth and throat by invading the mucous membranes that cover the lining of these areas. Most people who become infected with HPV in the mouth and throat are unaware of symptoms, but it's possible that HPV can cause warts in and around the mouth and throat. HPV strains that present in the oral cavity do pose a serious health risk as they have been linked to oral cancer.

How does HPV increase my risk of oral cancer?

HPV in the mouth and throat is the leading cause of oropharyngeal cancer, a common form of oral cancer. Each year, in the U.S., about 9,000 people are diagnosed with oropharyngeal cancer that may be associated with HPV 16, the high-risk strain of HPV most responsible for oropharyngeal cancer in adults.

Over the past decade, there has been a rapid rise in the detection of these types of cancer—even in nonsmokers and nondrinkers—among patients in their 40s and 50s. It is believed that this higher rate of oropharyngeal cancers is due to an increase in HPV infection.



What are the signs of oropharyngeal cancer?

Common signs of oropharyngeal cancer are a persistent sore throat, earaches, hoarseness, enlarged lymph nodes, pain when swallowing, and unexplained weight loss. Speak with your dentist or physician if you experience several of these symptoms for more than two weeks.

How can I lower my risk of giving or getting HPV?

More research is needed to understand how HPV in the mouth and throat can be prevented. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all preteen boys and girls ages 11 to 12 be vaccinated for HPV, before they become sexually active. The vaccine also is recommended for males through age 21 and for females through age 26, if they did not receive the vaccine as a preteen. For more information on how to lower your risk of HPV, speak with your physician.

Regularly visiting your dentist is critical for improving the likelihood of early oral cancer detection and survival. Talk with your dentist for more information about the oral signs of HPV and how you can reduce your risk of developing oropharyngeal cancer.



The mission of the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the AGD, is to passionately support the efforts of the general dentist toward improving the oral health of the public. The AGD Foundation is strongly committed to promoting oral cancer awareness, risk factor prevention, and diagnostic training for general dentists that utilizes the best technology. For more information on the AGD Foundation's oral cancer awareness efforts, visit www.agd.org/agd-foundation.