



Oral and maxillofacial surgeons.
The experts in face, mouth and jaw surgery.

Head, Neck & Oral Pathology



Your oral and maxillofacial surgeon (OMS) is the expert for diagnosing and surgically treating cancer of the head, neck and mouth.

The Oral Cancer Foundation estimates that close to 42,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer this year. Oral cancer's mortality is particularly high, not because it is hard to detect or diagnose, but because the cancer is often discovered late in its development. Your family dentist or OMS is in the best position to detect oral cancer during your routine dental examinations.

Perform a Self-Exam Monthly

Oral and maxillofacial surgeons recommend that everyone perform an oral cancer self-exam each month.

Don't wait! See your OMS if you have any of these signs.

Using a bright light and a mirror:

- Remove any dentures
- Look and feel inside the lips and the front of gums
- Tilt head back to inspect and feel the roof of your mouth
- Pull the cheek out to see its inside surface as well as the back of the gums
- Pull out your tongue and look at all of its surfaces
- Feel for lumps or enlarged lymph nodes (glands) in both sides of the neck including under the lower jaw

When performing a self-examination, look for the following:

- White patches of the oral tissues (leukoplakia)
- Red patches (erythroplakia)
- Red and white patches (erythroleukoplakia)
- A sore that fails to heal and bleeds easily
- An abnormal lump or thickening of the tissues of the mouth
- Chronic sore throat or hoarseness
- Difficulty in chewing or swallowing
- A mass or lump in the neck

If the OMS agrees that something looks suspicious, a biopsy may be recommended. A biopsy removes a small piece of the suspicious tissue, which will accurately diagnose the problem and help the doctor to develop a specific plan of treatment.

Factors That May Cause Cancer

A number of primary factors may contribute to the development of oral cancer. These include:

- Heavy drinking and smoking
- Human papilloma virus version 16, which research shows is sexually transmitted between partners and related to the increasing incidence of oral cancer in young non-smoking patients
- Smokeless chewing or spit tobacco, promoted by some as a safer alternative to smoking, is actually no safer when it comes to oral cancers

Other conditions that may promote oral cancer include:

- Physical trauma
- Infectious disease
- Poor oral hygiene
- Poor nutrition

However, the research regarding the involvement of these conditions is uncertain. Most likely the interaction of many internal and external factors contribute to the development of oral cancer.

If you are at high risk for oral cancer, you should see your general dentist or oral and maxillofacial surgeon for an annual exam.

Your mouth is one of your body's most important early warning systems. Don't ignore any suspicious lumps or sores. Should you discover something, make an appointment for a prompt examination. Early treatment may well be the key to complete recovery.

The information provided here is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. It is provided to help you communicate effectively with your oral and maxillofacial surgeon. Always seek the advice of your oral and maxillofacial surgeon regarding an oral health concern.

The American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons (AAOMS), the professional organization representing more than 9,000 oral and maxillofacial surgeons in the United States, supports its members' ability to practice their specialty through education, research and advocacy. AAOMS members comply with rigorous continuing education requirements and submit to periodic office examinations, ensuring the public that all office procedures and personnel meet stringent national standards.

