

## Healthy Teeth for Life fact sheet

# Oral cancer



Queensland  
Government



Cancer  
Council  
Queensland

This fact sheet highlights the warning signs of oral cancer and the lifestyle factors that contribute to an increased risk of developing oral cancer.

### What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer is any cancerous tissue growth that occurs in or around the mouth. Oral cancer can be fatal.

### Where does it develop?

Oral cancer can occur on the lips, throat, gums, roof of the mouth, inside the cheeks and under the tongue.

### What are the risk factors for developing oral cancer?

- \* Smoking and the use of tobacco products
- \* Excessive use of alcohol
- \* Sun exposure
- \* Viral infections including the human papilloma virus (HPV)
- \* Advancing age
- \* Family history of cancer
- \* Oral cancer develops much more often in men than in women
- \* Indigenous Australians are diagnosed more often with oral cancer than other Australians

### What are the warning signs of oral cancer?

- \* Swelling or lumps anywhere inside the mouth, on the face or on the neck

- \* Sores in the mouth or on the lips, face or neck, that have not healed within a few weeks
- \* Red, white or dark patches in the mouth
- \* Loss of feeling or pain in any area of the mouth, face or neck
- \* Bleeding in the mouth that is persistent and unexplained
- \* Difficulty or pain when swallowing, talking or eating
- \* Persistent earache
- \* Difficulty in moving the tongue or jaw
- \* Loose teeth
- \* Altered sense of taste

If any of these signs apply to you, consult a doctor or dental practitioner immediately.

### Early detection of oral cancer

Regular dental checkups with your dental practitioner can help detect early signs of oral cancer.

Early detection saves lives. Be aware of any changes to your mouth, lips, face or neck and report them to your doctor or dental practitioner.

Treatment for oral cancer is more successful the earlier the oral cancer is detected.

### How do I reduce my risk of developing oral cancer?

- \* Have regular dental checkups
- \* Avoid excessive alcohol
- \* Quit smoking
- \* Eat two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables every day
- \* Early detection saves lives. Be aware of any changes to your mouth, lips, face or neck and report them to your doctor or dental practitioner
- \* Avoid excessive sun exposure
- \* Use a condom or dental dam during oral sex to avoid genital to mouth transmission of the HPV virus

#### For further information:

- Contact your dental practitioner
- **Visit:** [www.health.qld.gov.au/oralhealth](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/oralhealth)
- **Call:** 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for confidential health advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- **Email:** [oral\\_health@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:oral_health@health.qld.gov.au)
- Contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20

## Alcohol consumption can cause some cancers

There is evidence that drinking alcohol increases your risk of cancers of the mouth and throat.

Try to limit alcohol, or better still avoid it altogether. If you choose to drink alcohol, drink within the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines for alcohol consumption, which state:

*“For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury. The lifetime risk of harm from drinking alcohol increases with the amount consumed.” (\*)*

### A standard drink equals:

- \* 100ml of wine (one bottle of wine contains about seven standard drinks)
- \* 285ml (1 pot) of full strength beer
- \* 425ml (1 schooner) of low alcohol beer
- \* 30ml (1 nip) of spirits
- \* 60ml (2 nips) of sherry
- \* 200-250ml alcoholic soda (2/3 bottle)

Cocktails may contain more than three standard drinks!

### Action plan for limiting alcohol:

1. Choose low alcohol drinks.
2. Dilute alcoholic drinks, for example try a wine spritzer (wine and soda water) or a shandy (beer and lemonade).
3. Use water to quench your thirst and sip alcoholic drinks slowly.
4. Avoid binge drinking.
5. Eat some food while you drink alcohol.

It has been known for a long time that smoking is harmful to health. The combined effects of smoking and alcohol greatly increase the risk of cancer, more so than from either of these factors alone. Up to 75 per cent of cancers of the upper airway and digestive system can be related to the combined use of alcohol and smoking.

\* National Health and Medical Research Council. (2009). Australian Guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. Canberra, ACT: NHMRC.

## Quit smoking Call 13 QUIT (13 7848)

Smoking accounts for almost 20 per cent of all cancer deaths.

More than 15,000 Australians die from smoking-related diseases each year.

Smoking can cause a range of cancers including cancer of the mouth and throat. Smoking also causes a number of other diseases including emphysema, chronic bronchitis, heart disease, stroke, and peripheral vascular disease.

The good news is that it's never too late to quit. Quitting smoking has immediate and long term benefits. All people that smoke would benefit from quitting smoking, regardless of their age.

Getting help can greatly improve your chance of quitting successfully. Enlist the support of your family, friends and a health professional. Call the Quitline on 13 QUIT (13 7848) for free information, practical assistance and support. Quitline's trained counsellors are available seven days a week

to help you get through the process of quitting smoking.

Remember to protect your family and friends from second-hand smoke by choosing not to smoke in your home. If you don't smoke, breathing in other people's cigarette smoke can increase the risk of a wide range of serious diseases, including cancer. Protect your family and friends by making your home smoke free. Remember, smoking in the car when children under 16 are present is against the law in Queensland.

### Action plan to quit smoking:

1. Call Quitline on 13 QUIT (13 7848).
2. Discuss stopping smoking with a general practitioner or pharmacist and plan your quitting strategy together.
3. Consider using nicotine replacement therapy or non-nicotine medications that are effective in helping smokers to quit. Speak to your general practitioner about the best option for you.
4. Remember that stopping smoking takes practice, those who succeed are those who keep trying.

#### Helpful websites:

- [www.quitbecauseyoucan.org.au](http://www.quitbecauseyoucan.org.au)
- [www.quitnow.info.au](http://www.quitnow.info.au)
- [www.health.qld.gov.au/quitsmoking](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/quitsmoking)

**For further information and support for you and your family visit [www.cancerqld.org.au](http://www.cancerqld.org.au) or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.**

Disclaimer: The information enclosed is provided for educational purposes or for personal use only. Cancer Council Queensland (CCQ) strongly advises this information should not be used as a substitute for seeking medical or health care advice. We strongly recommend that you seek advice from your doctor or treating health care team before making any decision about your health care treatment. Please note that the information enclosed reflects the opinion of the author/s at the time of writing. Every effort has been made by CCQ to ensure its accuracy, however CCQ and its advisors do not accept any liability in relation to this information. This publication is current as at June 2011.