

Script – Print – No lip service when it comes to oral cancer

Of all cancers, oral cancer is not often talked about. But medical experts say it's crucial to pay attention to early warning signs.

According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, oral cancer includes cancers of the mouth and the back of the throat. That includes cancers that develop on the tongue, on the tissue lining the mouth and gums, under the tongue, at the base of the tongue, and the area of the throat at the back of the mouth.

Oral cancer makes up about 3% of all cancers diagnosed each year in the United States; there were approximately 54,000 new cases in 2022.

"It can be a little mouth sore," says Deborah Oyelowo, a family nurse practitioner who specializes in hematology/oncology for OSF HealthCare. "Oh, maybe I bit my tongue or have a little bump on my lip or a bump on the back of my throat. Or I can feel this bump under my tongue. There could be bumps or there could be something else brewing that we have no idea."

Oral cancer is seen most often in people 40 and older. Most cancers in the mouth are related to tobacco use, drinking alcohol, or both, and most throat cancers are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV). The number of HPV-related cancers has spiked in the past few years.

Some studies show twice as many men as women develop oral cancer.

"I believe it's due to the fact that men tend to smoke more, drink more and lack follow up appointments with providers," says Oyelowo. "Men tend to procrastinate; they tend to be like, 'Oh, we're good.' I believe that's the reason why the increase in this population is on the rise."

While there are many causes of oral cancer including genetics, poor nutrition and age, tobacco and alcohol use continue to play a significant role. That includes tobacco of any kind, such as cigarettes, cigars, e-cigarettes and chewing tobacco. Using both tobacco and alcohol increases the risk even more.

Oyelowo says it's never too late to stop smoking and curb your alcohol consumption.

"Smoking is one of the worst things you can invest in," she adds. "I tell people who smoke to 'try and stop.' Because smoking is attributed to many forms of cancer and oral cancer is one of them."

Oyelowo says it's important to pay attention to changes within your body because when it comes to cancer, prevention is just as important as a cure.

She adds that if you have any of the following symptoms for more than a couple of weeks, call your doctor or dentist.

- Pain or bleeding in the mouth
- Numbness in your tongue or other areas of your mouth
- A lump in the neck
- A white or red patch in the mouth

- Problems chewing, swallowing, or talking
- A sore or lump in your mouth, lip or throat

“Know when something is not right,” says Oyelowo. “Have a regular routine checkup with your dentist. And follow up with your doctor when something is not right. I need patients to have an established relationship with a doctor.”

For more information, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).