

Oral Lesions and Cancer:

What Are Oral Lesions? (Precancerous and Cancerous)

Precancerous oral lesions are abnormal cell growths in or around the mouth. They may become cancer. **Cancerous oral lesions** are life-threatening cell changes in the mouth. These lesions need to be detected early to give you a better chance for a cure.

Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of precancerous and cancerous oral lesions may include:

A sore in the mouth that doesn't heal within 3 weeks

White or red lesions or ulcers on the tongue, gums, or lining of the mouth that don't go away

Tenderness or pain in the mouth that persists

Your Evaluation

See your dental professional about any sore or pain in the mouth that doesn't go away in 3 weeks. He or she will ask questions about your medical and dental history. Your entire mouth, including your lips and teeth, will be checked. A biopsy or other tests may also be done.

A **biopsy** is the best way to find out if a lesion is precancerous or cancerous. During a biopsy, the area around the lesion will be numbed. A part of the lesion will then be removed and sent to a lab to be examined under a microscope.

Other tests may be helpful in making the diagnosis. They include:

Staining. The area in your mouth around the lesion may be stained with a special dye. The dye binds to cancerous cells, staining only these cells. After a few hours, the color from the dye will disappear.

Cytology. Your dental professional may scrape the surface of the lesion to obtain cells. The cells are then sent to a lab, where they are examined for cancer.

Treatment

Your treatment will depend on the nature of the oral lesion. Your dental or medical professional can tell you about types of treatment, which may include:

Surgery

Radiation therapy

Combination therapy (Both surgery and radiation therapy may be used to treat advanced cases of oral cancer.)

Chemotherapy

Prevention

The best way to catch any problems early is to have regular oral checkups. To help reduce your risk for oral cancer, follow the tips below.

Get oral checkups. Visit your dentist at least 2 times a year.

Don't use tobacco. Tobacco use increases the risk for oral cancer. It's never too late to stop using tobacco.

Limit alcohol. If you drink a lot of alcohol, you may be at a higher risk for oral cancer.

Eat a healthy diet. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables may lower your risk for oral cancer.

Use good oral hygiene. Brush and floss your teeth each day. If you wear dentures, keep them clean.