



**SADA**

THE SOUTH AFRICAN  
DENTAL ASSOCIATION

*Patient Education  
Information  
brought to you by*



© 2021

South African Dental Association  
Private Bag 1  
Houghton, Gauteng  
South Africa

T: +27 11 484 5288  
E: [info@sada.co.za](mailto:info@sada.co.za)  
[www.sada.co.za](http://www.sada.co.za)

**Oral Cancers**

## What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer includes cancers of the lip, other parts of the mouth and the oropharynx (part of throat at the back of the mouth). Cancer is caused by the uncontrollable growth of cells that invade and cause damage to surrounding tissue.

Oral cancer appears as a growth or sore in the mouth that does not go away.

## Signs of oral cancer

Some common signs of oral cancer include:

- swellings/thickenings, lumps/bumps, rough spots/crusts or eroded areas on the lips, gums, or other areas inside the mouth;
- development of velvety white, red, or speckled (white and red) patches in the mouth;
- unexplained bleeding in the mouth;
- unexplained numbness or pain/tenderness in the face, mouth, or neck;
- dramatic weight loss;
- persistent sores on the face, neck, or mouth that bleed easily and do not heal within two weeks;
- a soreness or feeling that something is caught in the back of the throat;
- difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or tongue;
- hoarseness, chronic sore throat, or change in voice;
- ear pain;
- change in the way your teeth or dentures fit together.

## What can you do?

- Seek help if you are concerned, as early diagnosis is key: early detection improves treatment outcomes through timely referral for specialist care.

- Avoid tobacco use and excessive alcohol consumption: tobacco and alcohol use are two major causes of oral cancer worldwide, accounting for about 90 per cent of oral cancers.
- Reduce your risk of human papillomavirus (HPV) infection: around 70 per cent of oropharyngeal cancers are linked to HPV. This is a common virus which causes no harm in most people. But in some people, the virus can cause changes in the throat making them more likely to become cancerous in the future.
- Do not suffer in silence if you are undergoing cancer treatment: it is estimated that more than 30-35% of patients undergoing cancer treatment will suffer from conditions such as dry mouth, oral bleeding and oral mucositis. Speak to your healthcare professional if you have any concerns.

## What is the impact of oral cancer?

- Oral cancer is among the 10 most common cancers, with an estimated 300-700 thousand new cases every year.
- Oral cancer is most prevalent among middle-aged men, but women and younger people are increasingly affected.
- Oral cancer can be life threatening if not diagnosed and treated early.