

About this document: This is an installment of the Massachusetts State Oral Health Series (MOHS), developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH). The series focuses on important issues in oral health in the state through topic-specific installments to be released over time. This issue will outline what patients and families can do to prevent and improve oral cancer outcomes. Please visit www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-oral-health for more information.

FOCUS ON ORAL HEALTH

Practicing good oral health is an important part of maintaining good overall health, and is especially important for preventing diseases such as oral cancer. Oral cancer is an uncommon, but **serious** disease both in Massachusetts and nationwide. Many of those who develop oral cancer are diagnosed with late stage disease that has spread to other organs of the body. *Most oral cancers are preventable by reducing your risk factors as soon as possible, particularly by quitting tobacco use and limiting alcohol consumption.*

In Massachusetts from 2013-2017¹ there were:

5,048
new cases of
oral cancer

and

985
deaths from
oral cancer

Nationally, more Black, Non-Hispanic men die from oral cancer (5 deaths for every 10,000 people) compared to White men (3.8 deaths for every 10,000 people).²

THE FACTS

Types³

Oral cavity cancer: These are the most common type of oral cancer. They occur on the lips, tongue, and mouth.

- **What to look for:** a sore in the mouth that does not go away or bleeds, a lump or thickening in your cheek, white or red patches on the gums, tongue or lining of the mouth, trouble chewing or moving the tongue.

Throat cancer (oropharyngeal): A less common type of cancer. Often linked with the human papilloma virus infection (HPV).

- **What to look for:** white or red patches on the tonsil, a sore throat, trouble swallowing or trouble moving the jaw.

If you notice any of these changes, contact a dental or medical provider as soon as possible.

Risk Factors⁴

- Those who are **over the age of 55**
- Nationally, **men** are twice as likely to develop oral cancers than women
- Those with any type of **anemia**
- Those with **immune system issues**
- Those who **smoke**, use **chewing tobacco**, or **snuff**
- Those who **drink** 6 oz. of liquor, 5 oz. of wine, or 36 oz. of beer or more per day
- Those who have **human papilloma virus (HPV)**
- Those with a **diet low in fruits and vegetables**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who should get screened for oral cancer?

If you have one or more of the risk factors for oral cancer listed on the previous page, it is important to let your medical and dental provider know. These providers can help develop a plan for you based on your risk factors.

Who can perform an oral health screening? An oral cancer screening is very simple and can be performed by any medical or dental provider. Between appointments, high risk patients are also encouraged to perform a brief screening on their own by looking in the mouth and under the tongue once every month to look for any changes.

What can you do to prevent or detect oral cancer early?

The best way to prevent oral cancer is to reduce any risk factors that you might have as soon as possible, particularly by quitting smoking and minimizing drinking. Even after many years of use, you can still prevent oral cancer by quitting tobacco use and limiting alcohol as soon as possible. For help, it's important to talk to your medical or dental provider as they will be able to connect you with resources in your community. It is important for everyone, regardless of risk factors, to take steps towards prevention and early detection of oral cancer. The following are tips to monitor your oral health status over time:



Quit

Tobacco use is one of the biggest risks for oral cancer. Those who quit tobacco are less likely to develop oral cancer, no matter how long they have been using it. Counseling by a medical provider and education are the keys to success in quitting. For assistance with quitting, contact your medical or dental provider.



Reduce

Drinking more than 6 oz. of liquor, 5 oz. of wine, or 36 oz. of beer per day is another major risk for developing oral cancer, particularly for those who already use tobacco. Talk to your medical or dental provider about reducing the amount of alcohol you consume.



Visit

Make sure to visit your medical and dental providers regularly as they will be able to best advise you on the next steps to take to prevent and screen for oral cancer. Also, be sure to tell your providers if you have any of the oral cancer risk factors.



Follow Up

Follow up with any appointments your medical and dental providers make to address any oral health concerns that come up. It is important to address any concerns as soon as possible.



Look

Between appointments with medical or dental providers, it is important to pay close attention to any changes that you notice in your mouth. Once every month, look in your mouth to check for any new or painful bumps and report changes as soon as possible to a medical or dental provider.

A note on tobacco cessation: Quitting the use of tobacco is crucial to protecting yourself from oral cancer. Massachusetts has several free programs available to you to help you. **Most insurance providers, including MassHealth, cover medications and nicotine replacements** that may help stop cravings to smoke or chew tobacco. Ask your provider or call the Massachusetts Smokers' Helpline for more information. **(1-800-QUIT-NOW)**

“For patients, it may be hard to hear the word cancer. No one thinks it's going to be them, until they are diagnosed. The worst thing you can do is not get screened.”

-Christine Joyce, BSDH, RDH

References

1. Data from the Massachusetts Cancer Registry from 2014-2017
2. Dodd, V. J., Watson, J. M., Choi, Y., Tomar, S. L., & Logan, H. L. (2008). Oral cancer in African Americans: addressing health disparities.
3. Cancer Center: <http://www.cancercenter.com/oral-cancer/types/>
4. Oral Cancer Foundation Facts: <http://oralcancerfoundation.org/facts/>