
What Are Oral Lesions? (Precancerous and Cancerous)

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

Symptoms

The symptoms of precancerous and cancerous oral lesions may include:

- A sore in the mouth that doesn't heal within 2 weeks
- White or red lesions or ulcers on the tongue, gums, or lining of the mouth that don't go away
- Soreness or pain in the mouth that doesn't go away
- A lump or thickening in the cheek
- Numbness of tongue or other areas of the mouth

Your evaluation

See your dental care provider about any sore or pain in the mouth that doesn't go away within 2 weeks. They will ask questions about your health history and dental history. Your entire mouth, including your lips and teeth, will be checked. A biopsy or other tests may also be done.

Biopsy

This 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 and checked under a microscope.

Other tests

Some other tests may help make the diagnosis. They include:

- **Staining.** The area in your mouth around the lesion may be stained with a special dye. The dye binds to precancerous and cancerous cells, staining only these cells. After a few hours, the color from the dye will disappear.
- **Cytology.** Your dental care provider may scrape the surface of the lesion to get cells. The cells are then sent to a lab and checked for cancer.

Treatment

Your treatment will depend on the type of the oral lesion. Your healthcare provider can tell you about types of treatment. This may include surgery, radiation therapy, or

chemotherapy. A combination of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy may be used to treat advanced cases of oral cancer.

Prevention

The best way to catch 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, or as advised.
- **Don't use tobacco.** Tobacco use increases the risk for oral cancer. This includes using cigarettes, pipes, chewing tobacco, and cigars. It's never too late to stop using tobacco. Ask your healthcare provider for resources to help you quit.
- **Limit alcohol.** If you drink a lot of alcohol, you are at a higher risk for oral cancer. Your risk is especially high if you drink alcohol and use tobacco.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Eating a lot of fruits and vegetables may lower your risk for oral cancer.
- **Stay at healthy weight.** Extra body weight is linked to oral cancer. Ask your healthcare provider what a healthy weight is for you. They can help you reach your goal weight.
- **Use good oral hygiene.** Brush your teeth at least twice a day, and floss your teeth daily. If you wear dentures, keep them clean.