



After a Mouth and Throat Cancer Diagnosis



Cancer that starts in the mouth is called oral cancer or oral cavity cancer. Cancer that starts in the middle part of the throat (pharynx) is called oropharyngeal cancer. The oral cavity and oropharynx help you breathe, talk, eat, chew, and swallow. If you have been told you have one of these cancers, you've probably already had exams, x-rays and scans, and a biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). Other tests might have been done on the cancer cells to check for certain proteins and gene changes called biomarkers. You might also have other procedures to find out if the cancer has spread. These tests help your doctor know what type of cancer you have, what stage it is, and what treatment might help.

Treatment for mouth and throat cancer

Your treatment will depend on the type and stage of the cancer you have. Your treatment options will also depend on the results of tests on the cancer cells, your health, and your personal preferences.

Surgery is often the first treatment for these cancers. It can be done to remove the cancer and an edge of healthy tissue around it. Sometimes, surgery is more complex if all or part of the tongue, throat, voice box, or jawbone need to be removed. If needed, some teeth might be removed, too. Surgery may also be used to take out lymph nodes in the neck area to find out if the cancer spread to them.

Other treatments for these types of cancer can include radiation, chemo, targeted therapy, or immunotherapy. Many times, more than one type of treatment is needed. Several treatments can be used to help prevent or relieve symptoms of mouth or throat cancer. Sometimes, they are given along with other treatments. Your doctor will help you decide which treatments are best for you.

Be sure to ask:

- What type of cancer do I have?
- What stage is the cancer, and what does that mean?
- Has my cancer been tested for human papillomavirus (HPV)?
- What is the goal of treatment?
- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- Will I need surgery? If so, how much?
- What will I look like after surgery?
- Will I have problems speaking or eating after surgery?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too?
- Should I see a dentist before treatment?

What to expect before and during treatment

Your cancer care team will explain your treatment plan to you. This team may include different doctors, nurses, and other health care workers, depending on the type of treatment you need. For example, if you need surgery, your surgeon will let you know how it will be done and what will be removed. They will work with you to plan for any special equipment or therapy you might need after surgery. If you need other types of treatment, your cancer care team will explain how it is given, help you get ready for it, keep track of how you're doing, and help you with any side effects. You might also get other tests at certain times to see how well your treatment is working. If you are expected to have tooth or eating problems, your care team will explain what can be done to help.

Not everyone going through treatment for mouth and throat cancer will have the same side effects. For example, a person might have trouble eating or swallowing due to irritation from radiation therapy. Sometimes, side effects get worse if more than one type of treatment is needed. And people getting the same treatment might have different side effects.

Be sure to ask:

- What side effects might I have, and what can I do about them?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How often will I get treatment? How long will it last?
- Where will I go to get treatment? Can I drive myself?
- If I have trouble eating and swallowing, what can be done?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities, like work and exercise?
- Are there any clinical trials that might be right for me?

What to expect after treatment

After treatment, ask your cancer doctor for a treatment summary and follow-up plan. This is called a survivorship care plan. Your cancer doctor will work with your family or primary care doctor to help manage side effects from treatment and check your general health. You will have regular tests to check if your cancer has come back or if a new cancer has started in a different part of your body.

You might be faced with changes to your body after surgery and other treatment. They may change how you eat, chew, or swallow, which could affect your body in different ways. Be sure to ask the doctor what to expect, and let them know if you have any problems. If you have problems eating and getting enough nutrients, you might continue to work with a dentist or dietitian as you recover from treatment.

People who have had mouth or throat cancer are at risk of having it again or getting certain other types of cancer. Even if you feel fine after finishing treatment, it's important to ask your cancer care team about a regular schedule for follow-up tests to check if your cancer has come back.

For some people, the cancer might not go away completely. They might continue to get treatment, and tests will still be needed to see how well it's working.

Be sure to ask:

- Where do I get a copy of my treatment summary and follow-up plan?
- How often do I need to see my cancer care team?
- When and how should I contact them?
- Will I need tests to see if my cancer has come back, or to check for problems from my treatment?
- Do I need any screening tests, like a mammogram or colonoscopy, to find other cancers early?
- Are there late or long-term side effects from treatment that I should watch for?
- Where can I find my medical records after treatment?

Staying healthy

Be sure to tell your doctor or cancer care team if any treatment side effects don't go away or if you have any new symptoms.

There are things you can do to keep yourself healthy during and after treatment. Not smoking and not drinking alcohol are ways to help reduce your chance of the cancer getting worse or coming back. Getting to and staying at a healthy weight and eating a healthy diet might be hard to do for some people. Be sure you are keeping appointments, and let your cancer care team know if your weight or ability to eat changes. Being active can also help you stay healthy and may lower your risk of getting other cancers.

Dealing with your feelings

Having mouth and throat cancer might make you feel scared, sad, or nervous. It's normal to have these feelings, and there are ways to help you cope with them

- Don't try to deal with your feelings by yourself. Talk about them, no matter what they are.
- It's OK to feel sad or down once in a while, but let your cancer care team know if you have these feelings for more than a few days.
- If your doctor says it's OK, continue doing things you enjoy like spending time outdoors, going to a movie or sporting event, or going out to dinner.
- Get help with tasks like cooking and cleaning.

You might want to reach out to friends, family, or religious leaders or groups. Counseling can also help. Some people find it helpful to talk with others who've been through the same things. A support group can offer that. Tell your cancer care team how you're feeling. They can help you find the right support.



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/mouththroatcancer or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.