

# YOUR Oral Health *& Oral Cancer*

*Just hearing the words 'oral cancer' can be scary. But by maintaining your oral health, you can lower your risk of developing it.*



Each year, more than 53,000 men and women are diagnosed with some form of

oral cancer, according to the Oral Cancer Foundation. It's important to understand the risks, as well as oral cancer's connection to gum disease, so you can take preventive measures.

Tobacco and heavy alcohol use—a lifestyle of 25 cigarettes per day and seven or more drinks per week—is oral cancer's primary cause, according to the National Cancer Institute, followed by HPV infection, over-exposure to the sun, a history of oral cancer, and a poor diet. Advanced gum disease, called periodontitis, also can play a role.

Periodontitis is caused by bacterial infection that damages the soft tissue and bone that support the teeth. Research shows a link between



periodontitis and increased cancer risk, although the exact mechanism connecting the two diseases is still uncertain.

Studies also show that people whose teeth and gums are in poor condition may be more susceptible to an oral virus that can cause certain mouth and throat cancers.

Oral cancer typically first appears as a growth or sore in the mouth that doesn't go away. This type of cancer, which includes cancers of the lips, tongue, cheeks, floor of the mouth, hard and soft palate, sinuses, and pharynx (throat), can be life-threatening if not diagnosed and treated early.

Don't wait until your mouth or tongue becomes painful to see a doctor, because poor oral health

isn't always accompanied by pain. Early detection is key to successfully treating oral cancer, and there are other things you can do to reduce your risks.

## *The Path to Oral Health*

First, cut back on or eliminate smoking and drinking.

Next, brush at least twice a day for two minutes each time, and floss daily to reach what your brush can't.

A nutritious diet can contribute to good oral and overall health, too. Sweets, soft drinks, and other non-nutritious foods can lead to tooth decay. Bacteria in the mouth can mix with sugars in these foods and produce acids that attack the teeth.

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More tips to help you maintain your oral health:

- Drink water throughout the day. It helps rinse the mouth and neutralize harsh acids.
- Visit your dentist regularly for professional cleanings and oral exams. Inform your dentist immediately if you are experiencing red, swollen, or tender gums; bleeding while brushing or flossing; gums that pull away from the teeth and/or loose or separating teeth; red, white or swollen areas in any part of your mouth; or persistent bad breath. These can be signs of gum disease.

Tell your dentist if you have oral cancer now or are pregnant, or receiving chemotherapy or taking medications for any chronic medical condition, or if there has been any change in your health.

Your dentist can help you manage the oral conditions that may result from your medical condition or treatments.

## Mouth care and oral cancer

**More than one-third of all cancer patients** develop complications that affect the mouth, according to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research.

These mild to severe side effects can include mouth sores, infection, dry mouth, sensitive gums and jaw pain.

Your dentist can evaluate your dental health and discuss which treatment options you should consider prior to starting cancer treatment.

Some treatment options may include fluoride treatments to prevent cavities, filling existing cavities, treating gum disease, removing infected teeth or restoring crowns or bridge work to ensure you will be able to chew your food.

Source: National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research ([nidcr.nih.gov](http://nidcr.nih.gov))



Educating yourself about these and other important oral health topics will help you maintain a healthy smile and your oral health. 🦷

**FYI:** More information can be found at the TRICARE Dental Program's (TDP) Dental Health Center ([uccitdp.com](http://uccitdp.com)); American Dental Association ([ada.org](http://ada.org)); National Cancer Institute ([cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov)); and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ([hhs.gov](http://hhs.gov)).

## Fact sheets in United Concordia's oral health series:



• Fluoride & Your Oral Health



• Oral Health for Kids with Special Needs



• Your Oral Health & Heart Disease



• Your Oral Health & Organ Transplants

• Oral Health: Infant to Teen

• Preventive Oral Care for Everyone

• Your Oral Health & Lupus

• Your Oral Health & Rheumatoid Arthritis

• Oral Health & Your Overall Wellness

• Your Oral Health & Diabetes

• Your Oral Health & Oral Cancer

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Download fact sheets from the TRICARE Dental Program (TDP) Dental Health Center: [uccitdp.com](http://uccitdp.com)