



# Frequently Asked Questions About Oral Cancer

**MetLife**<sup>®</sup>

## What is oral cancer?<sup>1</sup>

Oral cancer is a disease that occurs in the mouth (oral cavity) or the part of the throat at the back of the mouth (oropharynx). The oral cavity and oropharynx include the lips, the inside lining of the lips and cheeks, the salivary glands, the teeth, the gums, the tongue, the floor of the mouth below the tongue, the bony roof of the mouth (hard palate), and the area at the back of your mouth (soft palate).

According to the National Cancer Institute, most incidents of oral cancer begin in the flat (squamous) cells that cover the surfaces of the mouth, tongue, and lips. These cancers are called squamous cell carcinomas.<sup>1</sup>

## What are the symptoms of oral cancer?<sup>2</sup>

Common symptoms of oral cancer include:

- Patches inside your mouth or on your lips that are white, a mixture of red and white, or red
- A sore on your lip or in your mouth that won't heal
- Unexplained bleeding in your mouth
- Unexplained loose teeth
- Difficulty or pain when swallowing
- Difficulty wearing dentures due to swelling or sores on your gums
- A lump in your neck
- An earache

If you experience any of these symptoms, be sure to see your doctor or dentist. These symptoms do not necessarily mean cancer; infections or other problems can cause similar symptoms. A visit to your doctor or dentist can help to identify the problem so it can be diagnosed and treated as early as possible.

## What are the risks and how can I reduce them?

Research points to certain risk factors that could increase the likelihood of developing oral cancer. The chart on page 2 includes some of the more common risk factors. By reducing your exposure to these risks, you may help reduce your chances of developing oral cancer.

<sup>1</sup> National Cancer Institute, "What You Need to Know About Oral Cancer," <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/oral/allpages>. Accessed 05/02/2010.

<sup>2</sup> National Cancer Institute, "What You Need to Know About Oral Cancer," <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/oral/allpages>. Accessed 05/02/2010.

RISK FACTOR	HOW TO REDUCE YOUR RISK
<p><b>Tobacco</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smokers are many times more likely than non-smokers to develop oral cancer.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>Pipe smokers have a particularly significant risk for cancers in the area of the lips that touch the pipe stem.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>Oral tobacco products (snuff or chewing tobacco) are associated with cancers of the cheek, gums, and inner surface of the lips.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>Alcohol</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drinking alcohol increases a person's risk of developing oral cancer, whether or not he or she uses tobacco.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Limit your tobacco and alcohol exposure.</b></p> <p>Limiting or eliminating your exposure to tobacco greatly lowers your risk of developing oral cancer. The same is true of heavy drinking. Limit how much alcohol you drink, if you drink at all.<sup>4</sup></p> <p>For more information about quitting tobacco, see the "Where can I get more information" section at the end of this document.</p>
<p><b>Ultraviolet (UV) Light</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sunlight is the main source of UV light for most people. Cancers of the lip are more common in people who have prolonged exposure to sunlight.<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Limit your exposure to UV Light</b></p> <p>Be safe in the sun by reducing your exposure during the middle of the day, when the sun's UV rays are strongest. If you are out in the sun, wear a wide-brimmed hat to protect your face and lips, and use a sunscreen and lip balm with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 15.<sup>3</sup></p>
<p><b>Unhealthy Diet</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several studies suggest that a diet low in fruits and vegetables may be linked to an increased risk of cancers of the oral cavity.<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Eat a healthy diet</b></p> <p>Although it's not exactly clear what substances in healthy foods might be responsible for reducing the risk of oral cancer, the American Cancer Society recommends eating a healthy diet, with an emphasis on foods from plant sources.<sup>3</sup></p>

### How is oral cancer diagnosed?<sup>4</sup>

Some early cancers have symptoms that cause patients to seek medical or dental attention. Unfortunately, some cancers may not cause symptoms until they've reached an advanced stage or may cause symptoms similar to those caused by a disease other than cancer, such as periodontal (gum) disease. For this reason, it's important that you visit your dentist regularly for a routine dental checkup. An oral cancer screening should be a part of a routine dental check up and can identify oral cancers and pre-cancerous areas early. Ask your dentist about an oral cancer screening if you're unsure.<sup>5</sup>

If your dentist identifies a suspicious area, he or she may perform a brush biopsy of the area, using a small brush to gather cell samples. The specimen is then sent to a lab for computer analysis. Your dentist may also recommend an incisional biopsy, where the dentist removes part of the suspicious area for further laboratory testing.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> American Cancer Society, "Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancer," [http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/CRI\\_2\\_3x.asp?nav=crldg&dt=60](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/CRI_2_3x.asp?nav=crldg&dt=60). Accessed 05/02/2010.

<sup>4</sup> American Cancer Society, "Can Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancer Be Prevented?" [http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI\\_2\\_4\\_2X\\_Can\\_oral\\_cavity\\_and\\_oropharyngeal\\_cancer\\_be\\_prevented\\_60.asp?nav=cri](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI_2_4_2X_Can_oral_cavity_and_oropharyngeal_cancer_be_prevented_60.asp?nav=cri). Accessed 05/02/2010.

<sup>5</sup> The Oral Cancer Foundation, "Oral Cancer Diagnosis," <http://www.oralcancerfoundation.org/diagnosis/index.htm>. Accessed 05/02/2010.

## Where can I get more information?

For online research about oral cancer, its prevention and treatment, oral health, and quitting tobacco, visit the following web sites:

### For information about oral cancer and oral health:

- American Cancer Society at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)
- The Oral Cancer Foundation at [www.oralcancerfoundation.org](http://www.oralcancerfoundation.org)
- National Cancer Institute at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)
- American Dental Association at [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)

### For information about quitting tobacco:

- The Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER can talk with callers about ways to quit smoking and about groups that offer help to smokers who want to quit. Groups offer counseling in person or by phone.
- The Federal Government provides a free smoking cessation web site at <http://www.smokefree.gov>.

*This brochure is intended for your general knowledge. This information is not a substitute for visiting a dentist nor does this information replace advice given to you by your physician or dentist. By making this information available to you, MetLife is not engaged in rendering any medical or dental advice.*

© 2011 METLIFE, INC.  
Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, New York, NY 10166

L0511180371 (exp0712)  
(All States, DC, GU, MP, PR, VI)