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## Cancer of the Mouth and Throat

The vast majority of mouth and throat cancers develop in the lining of the mouth and throat. Sometimes the cause is unknown, but use of tobacco and excessive consumption of alcohol are well-known risk factors—especially when used together. Chewing tobacco and snuff are just as risky as smoking. Chronic irritation from jagged tooth surfaces or poorly fitting dentures are rare risk factors. Throat cancers usually develop after the age of 55, and men are two and a half times more likely to develop them than women.

Early symptoms of mouth cancer include discolored, patchy thickened areas on the inside cheek and gum, a lump or sore that fails to heal, and difficulty with dentures. Most mouth cancers occur along the side or on the bottom of the tongue or floor of the mouth. They're usually painless at first, even when they're visible or can be felt with a finger. Early symptoms of throat cancer include hoarseness that lasts longer than two weeks, pain or difficulty swallowing, and swelling of the neck.

Mouth and throat cancer can often be cured, especially if they're discovered and treated in the early stages. Early surgical removal of the tumor gives the best chance of cure with the fewest side-effects. Radiation therapy is an alternative to surgery and is useful for tumors too large for surgical removal.

To help prevent mouth or throat cancer, don't smoke or chew tobacco. Also, if you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. The combination of drinking and smoking is especially risky in the development of cancer.

As with most kinds of cancer, early detection is critical to successful treatment. If you notice any persistent change from the usual appearance or feel of the soft tissues in your mouth, call your medical professional. You should also call if your throat is hoarse or swallowing is difficult or painful for several weeks, or if you notice swelling in your neck. If cancer is suspected, a small amount of tissue will be taken from your mouth or throat under local anesthetic, and sent to a laboratory for study.

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### For more health information ...

- Connect to our Web site at **members.kp.org**. Here you'll find the Health encyclopedia, which offers more in-depth information on this and many other topics.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.