

Ready to start planning your care? Call us at [800-525-2225](tel:800-525-2225) to make an appointment.

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Cancer Center

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Tobacco use includes both smoking and smokeless tobacco (snuff and chewing tobacco). People who are exposed to secondhand smoke are also at a greater risk of head and neck cancer.

If you smoke or chew tobacco, you can reduce your risk of head and neck cancer — and the risk to those around you — by stopping now. If you've been diagnosed with throat cancer or are in treatment, it's not too late to quit.

[Learn more about Memorial Sloan Kettering's tobacco treatment program.](#)

Alcohol

Drinking alcohol is a major risk factor for head and neck cancer.

Tobacco and Alcohol Together

The combination of tobacco and alcohol use increases the risk of head and neck cancer even more than either of the two alone. Studies have shown that people who use tobacco and alcohol together have a substantially greater risk of [mouth cancer](#) than people who only smoke or who only drink. According to the National Institutes of Health, nicotine and alcohol together account for around 80 percent of mouth cancer in men and around 65 percent of mouth cancer in women.

HPV 16 and HPV 18

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is most commonly associated with cervical cancer. There is, however, a strong link between HPV infection and head and neck cancer. This is particularly strong in relation to [cancer that begins in the oropharynx \(the middle part of the throat\)](#). In fact, HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancer is the fastest-growing type of head and neck cancer in the United States.

Your risk of developing HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancer depends in part on the strain of HPV to which you were exposed. For instance, some strains cause warts on the skin, mouth, or genitals but rarely, if ever, cause cancer. Other strains have a higher risk. These have a greater association with cancer. The strains most commonly linked to head and neck cancer are HPV 16 and, less often, HPV 18.

Thankfully, for most people, including those with high-risk HPV, the body will get rid of the infection on its own. Unfortunately, there is no way to predict who among those with HPV 16 or 18 will go on to develop cancer.

Betel Quid and Gutka

People who chew betel quid or gutka, which are more common in parts of Asia, have an increased risk of head and neck cancer.

Radiation Exposure

A history of radiation in the head and neck area increases the risk of [salivary gland cancer](#) and [thyroid cancer](#).

Age

Some cancers, like those that begin in the mouth, can take years to develop. For example, most people diagnosed with mouth cancer are over 40. The average age of diagnosis is 60.

People diagnosed with HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancer, on the other hand, tend to be younger.

Ultraviolet Light

[Lip cancer](#) and [skin cancer](#) are more common among people who spend time in the sun. Tanning bed use can also increase the risk of lip cancer.

Other Head and Neck Cancer Risk Factors

Other factors that may put you at a greater risk of head and neck cancer include:

- a diet low in fruits and vegetables
- a diet high in salt-cured fish and meat
- a diagnosis of Plummer-Vinson syndrome
- exposure to the Epstein-Barr virus
- Asian ancestry
- drinking yerba mate, a caffeinated drink from South America
- poor oral hygiene
- workplace exposure to inhalants such as asbestos, wood dust, nickel alloy dust, and silica dust
- [gastroesophageal reflux disease \(GERD\)](#)
- a weakened immune system
- graft versus host disease, a condition that sometimes occurs after a stem cell transplant
- lichen planus, a disease that often affects the skin
- certain genetic syndromes, such as Fanconi anemia and dyskeratosis congenital

Ways to Prevent Head and Neck Cancer

Here are the top ways to reduce your head and neck cancer risk:

If you smoke or use other tobacco products, reach out to a [tobacco cessation program, like the one offered at MSK](#), to get help quitting.

If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.

Protect yourself against HPV infection by practicing safe sex and getting the HPV vaccine.

Do not use tanning beds and avoid extended periods of time in the sun.

Wear a protective face mask if you are exposed to toxic fumes and dust. Companies can install air-filtration systems to minimize employees' exposure to harmful fumes and dust.

It's also important to schedule regular checkups with your dentist. This is particularly important if you use tobacco or drink heavily. Many oral cancers are found during routine dental appointments.

Head and Neck Cancer Screening

Cancer screening refers to the exams recommended by doctors to detect cancer before symptoms develop. The purpose is to find cancer at its earliest, most treatable stages.

At present, no screening method has been proven to improve survival for people with head and neck cancer. However, Memorial Sloan Kettering's doctors advise a yearly physical exam of the head and neck by your primary care doctor. MSK experts also recommend a yearly routine dental evaluation. This should include an examination of the neck and inspection of the oropharynx and the mouth. To learn more, see our [Screening Guidelines](#) for head and neck cancer.

Memorial Sloan Kettering provides numerous prevention, screening, and wellness services. Our experts organize head and neck cancer screening days each spring in conjunction with Oral, Head, and Neck Cancer Awareness Week, sponsored by the Yul Brynner Foundation. This is a free service to the community to help increase awareness of head and neck cancer. For dates and locations, visit our [Public Events Calendar](#).

Request an Appointment

Call [800-525-2225](tel:800-525-2225)

Available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Eastern time)

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