

UNDERSTANDING ORAL CANCER: CAUSES, SYMPTOMS, AND EARLY DETECTION

Oral cancer is a serious health concern that affects thousands of individuals each year. According to the American Cancer Society, approximately 54,000 people in the United States will be diagnosed with oral or oropharyngeal cancer in 2024. The disease has a high mortality rate if not detected early, making awareness and early diagnosis crucial.

Causes and Risk Factors

Several factors contribute to the development of oral cancer, including:

- **Tobacco Use:** Smokers are six times more likely to develop oral cancer than non-smokers.
- **Alcohol Consumption:** Heavy alcohol use significantly increases the risk.
- **Human Papillomavirus (HPV):** Certain strains of HPV, particularly HPV-16, are linked to oral cancers.
- **Poor Nutrition:** Diets low in fruits and vegetables can contribute to cancer risk.
- **Excessive Sun Exposure:** Increases the likelihood of lip cancer.

Symptoms to Watch For

- Early signs of oral cancer may be mistaken for less serious conditions. Be on the lookout for:
 - Persistent sores or ulcers that do not heal.
 - Red or white patches in the mouth.
 - Difficulty swallowing or persistent sore throat.
 - Lumps or thickening in the cheek.
 - Unexplained numbness in the mouth or face.

Early Detection Saves Lives

Regular dental check-ups play a vital role in detecting oral cancer early. Dentists are trained to recognize early signs and may perform a screening as part of routine exams. Self-examinations can also help—if you notice persistent symptoms for more than two weeks, consult a healthcare provider immediately.

