

Diagnosing Mouth and Oropharyngeal Cancer

A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of 'Diagnosing mouth and oropharyngeal cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. There are sections on

- Tests for mouth cancer
- Further tests for mouth cancer
- What to ask your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

Tests for mouth or oropharyngeal cancer

If you have symptoms that could be due to mouth or oropharyngeal cancer you usually begin by seeing your GP. Your doctor will examine you and ask about your general health and about your symptoms. They may refer you to a specialist, who will examine you and then arrange for you to have tests in the hospital outpatient department.

Nasoendoscopy for oropharyngeal cancer

A nasoendoscopy or laryngoscopy lets the specialist look at all your upper air passages. They pass a narrow, flexible tube (a nasoendoscope) up your nose and down your throat. The tube has a light at the end and a camera. You can have a local anaesthetic (a medicine to numb the area) for this test if you want to.

Having a biopsy

The only way to make a definite diagnosis of mouth or oropharyngeal cancer is to take a sample of tissue (a biopsy) and look at it under a microscope. There are different ways of taking a biopsy. A scalpel biopsy means cutting out a circle of tissue from the affected area under local anaesthetic.

Your doctor may ask you to go into hospital for a panendoscopy. A panendoscope is a series of connected telescopes that a head and neck surgeon uses to look at your upper airways. You have this test under general anaesthetic (while you are asleep). The doctor can use the panendoscope to take a biopsy.

Fine needle aspiration

If your doctor can feel a lump in your neck, you may need to have a fine needle aspiration. This means putting a thin needle into the lump and drawing out cells and fluid. Your doctor may also use a fine needle biopsy to see if the cancer has spread to any lymph nodes in your neck.

Further tests for mouth cancer

These further tests help your doctor to check whether the cancer has spread from where it started. They also help them to decide on the treatment you need. The tests you may have include

- A chest X-ray
- Scans – either a CT scan, an MRI scan or an ultrasound scan to give a detailed picture of the size of your cancer and whether it has spread
- A panorex X-ray (orthopantomogram) which takes pictures of the upper and lower jawbones and surrounding area
- A barium swallow if you have difficulty swallowing solid food – you swallow a liquid that contains barium to show up the outline of any abnormal growth on X-ray
- A PET-CT scan, which combines a CT scan and a PET scan

You will probably feel anxious after your tests when you are waiting for your results. It may help to talk to a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group.

What to ask your doctor about mouth cancer tests

- What tests will I need to have?
- What are you looking for?
- Will the tests show whether I have cancer?
- How soon should I have these tests?
- Will you know what treatment I will need when you have the results?
- Will the tests show whether my cancer can be operated on?
- Are any of the tests painful?
- Do I need an anaesthetic for any of the tests?
- Do I need to prepare for any of the tests?
- Do any of the tests have after effects?
- Can I have these tests as an outpatient?
- Should I bring someone with me when I have these tests?
- How long will the results take?
- Who will give me the test results?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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