Pre-cancerous lesions

What are pre-cancerous lesions?

Precancerous lesions are identifiable local signs (abnormalities) that, with time, have an increased risk of developing into cancer.

We are learning more all the time about the conditions that can develop into cancers of the mouth and face. For example, we believe that cancers usually arise as a result of an accumulation of several necessary genetic mistakes (mutations). Some of these precancerous conditions probably reflect stages along this progression towards cancer when there are enough genetic changes to result in changes in appearance and function but not to cause a cancerous behaviour.

What causes pre-cancerous lesions of the mouth or face?

We know that smoking and excessive consumption of alcohol can lead to precancerous lesions, which might become cancer.

If I have a pre-cancerous lesion, does it mean I will develop cancer?

Anyone can develop cancer of the mouth or face.

If you have a pre-cancerous lesion, the likelihood of you developing cancer in the same area is increased - but it is not a certainty.

Why is it important to know if I have a pre-cancerous lesion?

In general, it is important to know if you have pre-cancerous conditions because there are steps you can usually take to reduce the risk of progression to cancer.

Knowing that you have a pre-cancerous lesion, will also alert your doctor to keep a careful eye on the area in case it progresses into a cancer.
If it does progress, it can be treated early, which is usually better in terms of treatment options and survival rates.

**If I have a pre-cancerous lesion of the mouth or face what can I do?**

We know that some behaviours and exposures are associated with pre-cancerous lesions of the mouth and face.

Your doctor and dentist will discuss this with you and explain what steps you can take to reduce these exposures.

For example, some types of smoking and heavy consumption of alcohol is associated with mouth cancer.

**How are pre-cancerous lesions diagnosed?**

Dentists and doctors can recognise some pre-cancerous conditions by their appearance and behaviour but they will probably want to look at a biopsy under a microscope to make sure that there isn't a cancer developing in the area already. To do this they might take a biopsy (surgical sample) of some or all of the suspicious area (depending on its size and location). This is usually done after referral to an oral and maxillofacial specialist.

Knowing what the individual cells of the lesion are doing can help us decide what treatment and advice to offer you.

**How are pre-cancerous lesions treated?**

The difficulty in managing premalignant lesions often relates to the criteria used for assessing the presence or degree of premalignant features under microscope after a biopsy.