



# Throat (Oropharyngeal) Cancer

**Are you at risk?**

**What are the signs  
and symptoms?**

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## About Throat (Oropharyngeal) Cancer

Throat cancer can start inside the part of the throat directly behind the mouth. This area helps you talk, eat, chew and swallow. The most common type of throat cancer is squamous cell cancer. Squamous cells are cells that line the mouth, nose or throat.

Throat cancers account for roughly 2-4% of all cancers diagnosed in New Zealand. Approximately 300 people will be diagnosed with throat cancer each year and most will be treated successfully.

Throat cancer is becoming increasingly more common in all Western Countries, including NZ due to the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).

Throat cancer occurs most often in people over the age of 40 and affects more than twice as many men as women.

# Here's what you should watch for...

## Possible Signs and Symptoms

See your GP if any of the following symptoms last more than 3 weeks

- A sore throat on one side
- A lump in your neck
- Earache
- Difficulty swallowing or moving your mouth and jaw
- Changes in your voice

Like other parts of the body, the head and neck contain lymph nodes (also called lymph glands). These small, bean shaped glands are part of the lymphatic system. Lymph nodes are often the first place cancer cells spread to when they break away from a tumour.

There are large groups of lymph nodes in your neck. Mouth and throat cancers can spread to these lymph nodes and a lump in your neck that doesn't go away may be the first sign of a cancer.

## Early detection

It is important to find throat cancer as early as possible when it can be treated more successfully.

Symptoms suggested in this pamphlet can be caused by less worrying conditions, but it's important to have them checked by your doctor. Throat cancer can be treated more successfully when it's diagnosed early.

## What puts you at risk?

### Tobacco and alcohol use:

Tobacco use of any kind, including cigarette smoking, puts you at risk. Alcohol use also increases your chances of developing throat cancer. Using tobacco and alcohol together poses a much greater risk than using either substance alone.

### Human Papilloma Virus (HPV):

Many cases of throat cancer can be linked to this infection. HPV is a common virus spread through skin contact, often during sex. Many people who are sexually active will have HPV at some time during their life.

Your immune system is normally able to fight an HPV infection, and usually infections come and go without causing any problems. Most people with HPV in the throat will not develop throat cancer. However it's thought that, in some people, the virus can lie dormant for many months or even years before causing cell changes. These cell changes may develop into cancer.