
National Institutes of Health
National Cancer Institute
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Office of Cancer
Communications

Mouthwash Use in the Risk of Oral. and Pharyngeal Cancer

The use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages causes the large majority of cancers of the oral cavity (lip, tongue, mouth) and pharynx (throat). Heavy smokers (2 or more packs of cigarettes per day) who drink frequently (more than 4 drinks per day) have at least 35 times (3500 percent increase) the risk of these cancers than people who do not smoke or drink.* A survey of 866 patients with oral or pharyngeal cancers and 1,249 people without the disease showed that regular use of mouthwash may also contribute to increased risk of these cancers.

After adjustments to account for tobacco use and alcoholic beverage consumption, men and women using mouthwash regularly had a slightly increased risk of oral and pharyngeal cancers. However, the increased risk was seen only in people using mouthwashes with 25 percent or higher alcohol content and the risk rose the longer and more frequently the mouthwash was used. Men had a 60 percent higher risk and women had a 90 percent higher risk of these cancers, compared to those who did not use mouthwash.

In general, more than twice the number of men are diagnosed with oral and pharyngeal cancers; about 30,800 new cases will be diagnosed in the U.S. this year.

The findings from this and other studies provide incentive to clarify the relationship between mouthwash use and oral/pharyngeal cancers, but do not firmly establish the risk. While it is premature to make recommendations about using mouthwash, people who smoke tobacco or drink alcohol can greatly lower their risk of these cancers by stopping smoking and limiting their alcohol intake to moderate amounts (1 to 2 drinks daily).

The research was conducted by scientists from the National Cancer Institute, the National Center for Health Statistics, the New Jersey Department of Health, the California State Department of Health Services, Emory University, and the University of Southern California. A full description of the study will appear in a future issue of Cancer Research.

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Smoking and drinking in relation to oral and pharyngeal cancer. Cancer Research 48: 3282-3287, 1988.