

Daily Marijuana Use Linked to Increased Risk of Head and Neck Cancers

People with cannabis use disorder were more likely to develop oral cancer, oropharyngeal cancer and cancer of the larynx.

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Daily [marijuana](#) use may increase the risk of developing [head and neck cancers](#) three- to five-fold, according to a study from the American Head and Neck Society.

Head and neck cancer refers to a variety of different malignancies involving the mouth, throat, larynx (voice box), tonsils, salivary glands, jaw, nose and sinuses. Almost 90% of head and neck cancer is [squamous cell carcinoma](#) that arises in mucous membranes lining the mouth, throat and nose.

In the United States, about 71,100 people will be diagnosed with head and neck cancer in 2024, according to estimates from the [American Association for Cancer Research](#).

Alcohol and tobacco are two leading risk factors for head and neck cancers. In fact, smoking tobacco [can double the risk](#) of developing head and neck squamous cell carcinoma. What's more, a growing number of cases are being linked to human papillomavirus (HPV) or the Epstein-Barr virus.

The current study, [published in JAMA Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery](#), suggests that heavy marijuana use may also increase a person's risk for these cancers.

The study analyzed insurance data to observe the association between cannabis use disorder and head and neck cancers. Of the 4 million electronic health records, researchers found more than 116,000 diagnoses of cannabis use disorder among people with head and neck cancers.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the following are signs of cannabis use disorder:

- Using cannabis more than intended;
- Craving cannabis;
- Trying but failing to quit using cannabis;
- Becoming tolerant to its effects;
- Giving up important social activities in favor of using cannabis.

Across all age groups, those with cannabis use disorder were about 2.5 times more likely to develop oral cancer and nearly five times more likely to develop oropharyngeal cancer, which is cancer of the tonsils, soft palate or back of the throat. Additionally, this group was more than eight times more likely to develop cancer of the larynx.

Researchers said how marijuana is typically smoked—unfiltered, breathed in deeply and held in the lungs and throat for a few seconds—is one key reason for the association between the drug’s use and head and neck cancers.

“On average, people with cannabis use disorder smoke about a joint a day and do so for at least a couple years, if not longer,” Joseph Califano, MD, the Iris and Matthew Strauss Chancellor’s Endowed Chair in Head and Neck Surgery at the University of California, San Diego, [told CNN](#). Although Califano was not involved in the study, he coauthored an editorial in conjunction with the study.

He noted that the study did not find an association between “the occasional recreation use of marijuana and head and neck cancer.”

Researchers highlight the importance of informing people about the potential long-term risks of cannabis use, especially as it becomes more widely legalized and socially accepted throughout the United States.

To read more, click [#Cannabis](#) or Cancer Health’s [Basics on Head and Neck Cancer](#). It reads in part:

What are the risk factors for head and neck cancer?

The risk factors for developing head and neck cancer depend on the specific malignancy. Overall, smoking or chewing tobacco and alcohol consumption are major risk factors. A large and growing proportion of mouth and throat cancers are caused by HPV, while those attributable to other causes are falling. Sexual contact, including oral sex, is a common way to contract HPV, but the virus can also be transmitted through nonsexual contact.

Epstein-Barr virus causes some cases of nasopharyngeal (nose and upper throat) cancer and salivary gland cancer. Other risk factors include a family history of cancer, excessive sun exposure, poor oral health and a weakened immune system.

What are the symptoms of head and neck cancer?

Head and neck cancer can cause a variety of symptoms, depending on where it occurs and how advanced it is. Some malignancies don't cause symptoms until they've reached a more advanced stage, or they may cause nonspecific symptoms similar to those associated with other conditions. Symptoms may include:

- Lumps, bumps or swelling anywhere in the mouth, throat, face or neck
- Unexplained pain, tenderness or numbness in the mouth, throat, face or neck
- Unexplained bleeding
- Blocked sinuses and chronic sinus infections
- Difficulty swallowing, speaking or breathing
- Swollen lymph nodes in the neck.

How is head and neck cancer treated?

Treatment depends on where the cancer is located and how advanced it is when it is detected, including how many tumors there are, how large they are and whether they have spread to nearby lymph nodes or other parts of the body. Cancers caused by HPV are treated differently and typically have better outcomes than cancers with other causes.