

**Abstract:**

The mouth and oropharynx are among the ten most common sites affected by cancer worldwide, but global incidence varies widely. Five-year survival rates exceed 50% in only the best treatment centers. Causes are predominantly lifestyle-related: Tobacco, areca nut, alcohol, poor diet, viral infections, and pollution are all important etiological factors. Oral cancer is a disease of the poor and dispossessed, and reducing social inequalities requires national policies coordinated with wider health and social initiatives – the common risk factor approach: control of the environment; safe water; adequate food; public and professional education about early signs and symptoms; early diagnosis and intervention; evidence-based treatments appropriate to available resources; and thoughtful rehabilitation and palliative care. Reductions in inequalities, both within and between countries, are more likely to accrue from the application of existing knowledge in a whole-of-society approach. Basic research aimed at determining individual predisposition and acquired genetic determinants of carcinogenesis and tumor progression, thus allowing for targeted therapies, should be pursued opportunistically.