

## Does That Look Normal To You?

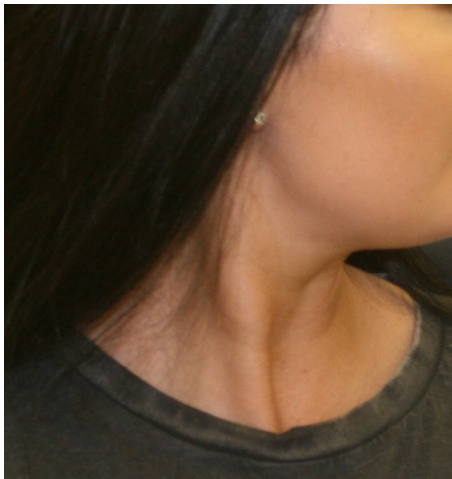
### *Things to look out for when carrying out a self-examination for early signs of mouth cancer*

The mouth is a secret place. A hidden area which, unless we're dental professionals, we're unlikely to know much about. Sadly, the mouth can hide signs of serious disease which we often wouldn't notice until the disease is advanced. That's why we should all regularly examine ourselves to find little problems before they become big ones.



Carrying out a self-examination is easy but we need to know what we're looking for; so how do we begin?

#### **The Self-Examination Procedure**



**Look at the neck from the front and the sides. Check that there are no unusual swellings and that the skin looks normal**

We don't need much. We need some good lighting and a mirror. Something to hold the lips out of the way like a lolly stick can make life easier. Magnifying glasses like reading glasses can help and a mobile phone to take pictures of anything we may find unusual can be really useful.

We begin by removing any make-up then look at our whole face and neck and the skin of the scalp if it is visible. We're looking for swellings we haven't noticed before and we're looking carefully at lumps, bumps and blemishes. Very few of us are blessed with completely clear complexions but have there been any changes recently? Have lumps got bigger or started to itch or bleed? If they have they need reporting to a medical or dental professional.

**Has this spot appeared recently? Has it changed, become bigger, started to itch or bleed?**

**If in doubt, get it checked out**



Let's look at our lips. The shape and size of lips vary among individuals but generally they should be more or less symmetrical and of even colour. There shouldn't be new swellings or sores that don't go away within a maximum of three weeks. It's important to also feel the lips. They should feel soft and without lumps. Dermal fillers are popular these days. Lips which have recently been filled may feel lumpy but should return to normal after about a week.



**Normal lips should feel soft. The skin should feel smooth and there should be no lumps or sores**



**Cold sores are common but be careful. Cold sores should heal in 10-14 days. If they last longer than that get them examined**

**This looked a lot like a cold sore but had been present for more than 2 months, felt hard and was getting bigger.**

**It turned out to be a form of skin cancer and needed to be surgically removed**



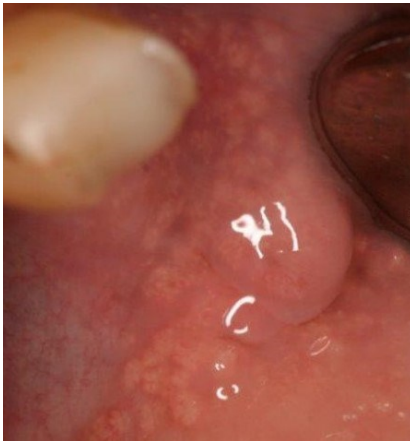
It's time to open the mouth and peer inside! You remember I said self-examination is easy? Well, it's even easier if someone else does it for you! A partner or friend will probably be happy to help if you return the favour.

We pull back the lips and have a look underneath. We pull away the cheeks and examine their surfaces. If it's possible to shine a lamp or a torch into the mouth we'll get a better view.



The inside of the lips and cheeks should be smooth and even in colour.

Occasionally you may see a raised line running along the cheek at the level of the teeth. This line is caused by cheek-biting and is usually present on both sides.



Not all lumps are suspicious. You will find a lump in the cheek next to the upper first molar tooth on both sides. This lump is the opening of the parotid saliva gland (the gland that swells up when we have mumps). These lumps should be of roughly equal size.



The gums should be firm, pink and with a stippled appearance like orange peel. They should not bleed when we touch them. The teeth they support should also feel firm. Looseness of the teeth is usually caused by gum disease but sometimes is a symptom of more serious conditions. If in doubt, contact a dentist.

Healthy gums should be firm and pink with a texture like orange peel



Some harmless conditions can cause changes to the appearance of the gums.

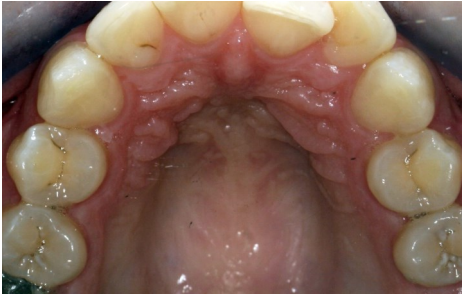
This is lichen planus, a common skin complaint.



Medicines can also cause changes. These swellings are the result of taking a drug to reduce blood pressure.

In all cases, if you are unsure, consult a dentist.

The roof of the mouth is divided into the hard palate and closer to the throat, the soft palate. The skin of the hard palate is tightly bound down to the bone. The skin of the soft palate generally looks a little different in colour. It is soft. We can see it move when we say 'Aah' By saying 'aah' we can see the back of the throat. We may notice the tonsils on either side. They should be roughly the same size. They should not have any sores or



The skin of the hard palate is tightly bound down to the bone. At the front (top of photo) are a number of grooves and ridges called ruggae and in the centre of the front a lump known as the incisal papilla



The soft palate leads back into the throat. The fleshy lump hanging from the middle is the uvula.. The tonsils are situated in the front part of the throat on both sides. They should be roughly equal in size and of an even pink colour without ulcers or sores of any kind.

ulcers on them. In the middle of the throat hangs the uvula. Again it should look smooth and without swellings or ulcers.

## The Tongue

The tongue is a really important part of our bodies. It allows us to speak, eat, taste our food and swallow. Unfortunately it is also a common place for mouth cancer to develop.



The surface of the normal tongue is covered by small projections called papillae

When we examine our tongue we're looking for normal appearance, texture and movement.

The surface of the normal tongue is covered with tiny lumps called papillae.



The sides of the tongue are smooth. Look carefully at this area and feel the sides of the tongue for lumps or changed texture.

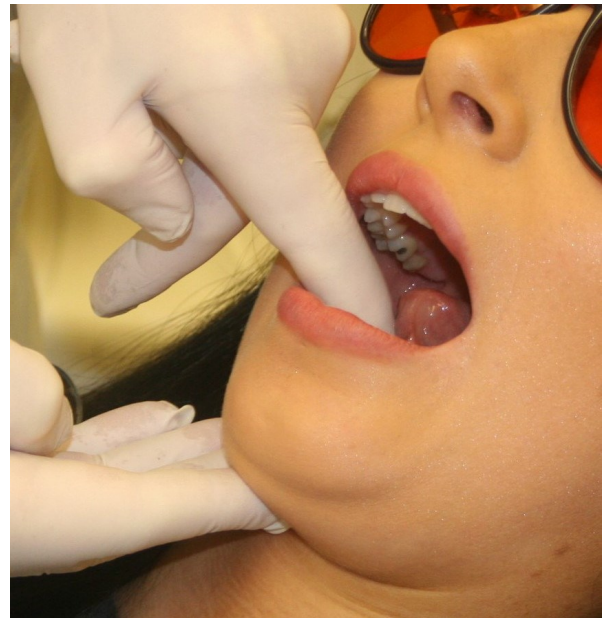
These papillae can vary a little in size but are generally evenly distributed. People with dry mouth often experience a loss of papillae leading to the surface of the tongue becoming smooth and red. Other conditions like anaemia can cause a similar condition so if you notice this happening have it checked out. The sides of the tongue are covered by a

different, softer sort of skin. The sides of the tongue lie above the floor of the mouth; another high-risk area for mouth cancer. The floor of the mouth is soft. To examine it for lumps you need to support it under the chin with one hand while feeling it with the other hand.



**The floor of the mouth showing the tongue attachment and underside of tongue. The two little lumps in the middle are saliva gland openings**

**To feel for lumps in the floor of the mouth use your other hand to support the tissues under the skin**



Everyone's mouth is different. Some people have structures in their mouths that not everybody has. The size of structures also varies between individuals but as a rule of thumb structures of roughly equal size on both sides of the mouth tend to be normal. Things of unusual appearance found on only one side of the mouth should be investigated.



**These bony lumps inside the lower jaw are normal but not everyone has them. Structures which are of roughly the same size and occur on both sides of the mouth are usually innocent anatomical features**

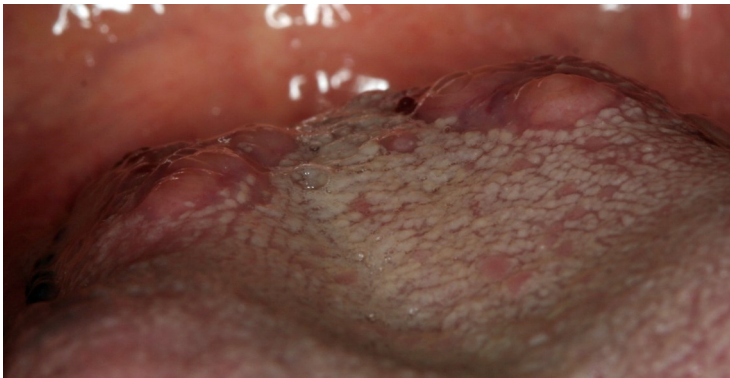
## Other Normal Anatomical Variations You May See



Bony lumps can sometimes be seen on the hard palate; again of roughly equal size and on both sides of the centre line



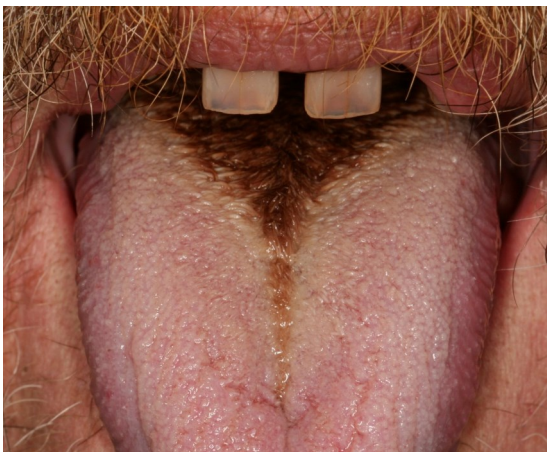
The lumps on the floor of the mouth where the saliva glands open can be quite large



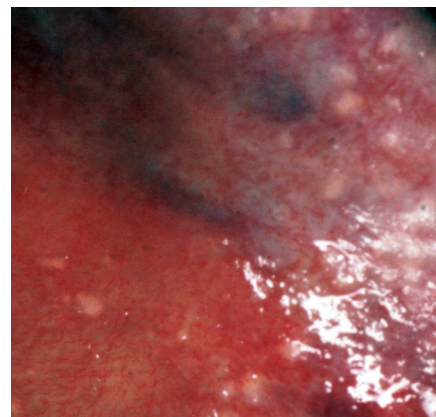
The back of the tongue can also show lumps on both sides. These lumps are a normal part of the tongue but are bigger in some people than others



The surface of the tongue is sometimes patterned. This is called 'geographic tongue' because the lines can resemble the outline of a map



Left: Black hairy tongue is caused by an overgrowth of the tongue papillae. It is most common in smokers and responds to an improvement in oral hygiene. The condition is harmless



Multiple yellowish spots on the lip or in the cheeks on both sides. These are Fordyce Spots, a kind of sebaceous gland. They are harmless

## **So what should we be looking for?**

- Ulcers that don't heal in a maximum of 3 weeks
- Red or White patches
- Changed texture of the skin
- Bleeding from the mouth (Usually a symptom of gum disease but check with a dentist)
- Teeth which suddenly become loose (Also usually a symptom of gum disease but get it checked out)
- A persistent sore throat or difficulty swallowing
- Hoarseness or changes to the voice

This article should help you understand some of the things you may see when you look carefully into your mouth for the first time.

Most of what you see will be normal, even if the appearance looks strange to you. Occasionally, things may not be normal so the most important message remains:

**If in doubt, get it checked out!**

Self-examination can be carried out as often as you wish but should be done at least once a month. A two-minute check for early signs of mouth cancer might be the best two-minutes you ever spend!