Following a review of the evidence against strict criteria, the UK NSC does not currently recommend universal screening for oral cancer.

Oral cancer is uncommon in the UK. It develops from a tumor in the mouth, most commonly on the surface of the tongue, mouth, lips or gums.

The main risk factor is smoking, which is linked to more than two-thirds of cases in men, and more than half of cases in women.

The most common type of oral cancer is called squamous cell carcinoma and it accounts for nine out of 10 cases. Over half of these cases are diagnosed when the cancer has spread to other areas of the body.

A screening programme would help if it could detect the cancer in an early stage before it has spread. This would improve survival rates, while subjecting patients to less intense and harmful treatments.

Key findings supporting the UK NSC recommendation

- It is clear that oral cancer develops from growths in the mouth, most often in the form of visible white lesions. Although these growths are indicators, only 5% of them will become cancerous. It is not yet known how to tell the cancerous from the non-cancerous ones.

- A reliable test has not been identified. There is no evidence to determine how well existing tests would perform in the general UK population.

The UK NSC regularly reviews its recommendations on screening for different conditions in the light of new research evidence becoming available.

To find out more about the UK NSC’s oral cancer recommendation, please visit:

legacy.screening.nhs.uk/oralcancer