

The role of alcohol in oral carcinogenesis with particular reference to alcohol-containing mouthwashes

1. MJ McCullough¹ and
2. CS Farah²

Overview

Worldwide, oral cancer represents approximately 5 per cent of all malignant lesions, with over 800 new intra-oral squamous cell carcinomas registered in Australia each year. Despite recent advances in therapy, the five-year survival rate remains around 50 per cent and the sequelae of treatment can be seriously debilitating. It has been long established that smoking and alcohol consumption are risk factors linked to the development of oral cancer. This review assesses the epidemiological evidence, supportive *in vitro* studies and mechanism by which alcohol is involved in the development of oral cancer. Further, we review the literature that associates alcohol-containing mouthwashes and oral cancer. On the basis of this review, we believe that there is now sufficient evidence to accept the proposition that alcohol-containing mouthwashes contribute to the increased risk of development of oral cancer and further feel that it is inadvisable for oral healthcare professionals to recommend the long-term use of alcohol-containing mouthwashes.

The association between alcohol-containing mouthwash and oral cancer

Alcohol is used in mouthwashes principally as a solvent for other ingredients. However, at 10–12 per cent it also acts as a preservative, antiseptic and caustic agent.²⁰ In addition to the above mentioned effects on mucosal permeability and metabolic production of acetaldehyde, studies have shown that high concentrations of alcohol in mouthrinses may have detrimental oral effects such as epithelial detachment, keratosis, mucosal ulceration, gingivitis, petechiae and oral pain.²¹ Bernstein *et al.* reported the presence of diffuse white oral mucosal lesions with long-term use of an alcohol-containing mouthwash.²² Some commercially available mouthwashes and their alcohol content are outlined in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Alcohol content of some commercially available mouthwashes

Mouthwash	Ethanol concentration (%)
Listerine Antiseptic	26 v/v

Table 1. Alcohol content of some commercially available mouthwashes

Mouthwash	Ethanol concentration (%)
Listerine Teeth Defence	22 v/v
Listerine Cool Mint	22 v/v
Listerine Tartar Control	22 v/v
Listerine Citrus Fresh	22 v/v
Listerine Smooth Mint	21.6 v/v
Cepacol Mint	15 v/v
Cepacol	14 v/v
Savacol Original	11.5 w/v
Savacol Freshmint	9.5 w/v
Listerine Whitening	8 v/v
Diffiam Solution	7.5 w/v
Diffiam-C Solution	7 w/v
Neutrafluor 220	7 w/v
Plax	6 w/v
Peroxyl	5.5 w/v
Neutrafluor 900	5 w/v

Conclusions

There is now sufficient evidence to accept the proposition that developing oral cancer is increased or contributed to by the use of alcohol-containing mouthwashes. It is the opinion of the authors that, in light of the evidence currently available of the association of alcohol-containing mouthwashes with the development of oral cancer, it would be inadvisable for oral healthcare professionals to recommend the long-term use of alcohol-containing mouthwashes.