

# From detection to prevention: managing oral precancerous conditions

Adeeb Hasan<sup>1</sup>, Nazia Khan<sup>2</sup>, Dilip Vijay<sup>3</sup>, Zameer Pasha<sup>4</sup>, Preeti Prakash Kale<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, Sree Sai Dental College and Research Institute, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup> Basic Medical Science, College Of Medicine Majmaah University, Al-Majmaah , Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

<sup>3</sup> Department of Anaesthesia , Specialist Anaesthesia - NMC Speciality Hospital, Al Nahda, Dubai

<sup>4</sup> Consultant In Oral And Maxillofacial Surgery, Durrat Al-Alammi Dental Clinic, Al-Majmaah , Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

<sup>5</sup> Department of Periodontology, Pravara Rural Dental College and Hospital, Loni, Maharashtra, India

ABSTRACT

Oral precancerous conditions encompass a spectrum of pathologies that pose a significant risk for malignant transformation, predominantly into oral squamous cell carcinoma. This comprehensive review explores the diverse range of oral precancerous conditions, their etiology, clinical presentations, and management strategies. Early detection and prompt intervention are pivotal in reducing the risk of malignant transformation and improving patient outcomes, making a compelling case for continued research and public health initiatives in this domain.

**Key words:** oral precancerous conditions, diagnosis, oral submucous fibrosis, treatment

## INTRODUCTION

Oral precancerous conditions constitute a critical facet of oral healthcare, representing a spectrum of potentially malignant pathologies that, if left unchecked, can progress to oral cancer. These conditions pose a significant public health concern globally, impacting millions of individuals and presenting challenges in both diagnosis and management. Understanding the diverse range of oral precancerous conditions, their risk factors, and the evolving strategies for their management is pivotal for healthcare providers, researchers, and policymakers [1]. The oral cavity is a dynamic anatomical site, exposed to various environmental factors and behaviors that can contribute to the development of precancerous lesions. Among the most well-known oral precancerous conditions are leukoplakia, erythroplakia, oral submucous fibrosis, and lichen planus [2]. These conditions are often characterized by distinctive clinical presentations, such as white or red patches, ulcerations, or fibrous bands, which can be the initial indicators of potential malignancy [3].

Etiologically, oral precancerous conditions are linked to a myriad of risk factors, including tobacco and alcohol consumption, betel nut chewing, Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection, and autoimmune processes. As these risk factors persist in various populations worldwide, the prevalence of oral precancerous conditions remains a cause for concern, emphasizing the need for effective prevention and management strategies [4, 5].

As we delve into this multifaceted topic, it becomes evident that oral precancerous conditions demand a multidisciplinary approach that combines medical, surgical, and behavioral interventions. Moreover, the psychosocial impact of these conditions on patients' lives underscores the necessity of holistic care that encompasses not only physical health but also emotional and social well-being [6].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Oral sub mucous fibrosis

Oral Submucous Fibrosis (OSMF) is a potentially malignant disorder of the oral cavity characterized by fibrosis (thickening and scarring) of the submucosal tissues. This condition predominantly affects the oral mucosa and can lead to limited mouth opening, pain, and functional impairment. Here, we delve into the clinical characteristics, etiological factors, diagnostic approaches, and

Address for correspondence:

Preeti Prakash Kale,  
Department of Periodontology, Pravara Rural Dental College  
and Hospital, Loni, Maharashtra, India  
E-mail: preetikale20jan@gmail.com

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evolving therapeutic strategies associated with OSMF:

#### Clinical characteristics:

**Limited Mouth Opening (Trismus)-** One of the hallmark features of OSMF is progressive and often severe trismus, which restricts mouth opening. This can lead to difficulty in eating, speaking, and maintaining oral hygiene. **Fibrous Bands:** OSMF is characterized by the presence of fibrous bands or bands of tissue in the oral mucosa, which can be palpated and visualized [7]. These bands contribute to the limited mobility of the oral tissues.

#### Burning sensation:

Patients with OSMF frequently report a burning sensation in the oral cavity, especially when consuming spicy or hot foods. **Blanching of Oral Mucosa:** The oral mucosa may appear pale or whitish (blanching), which is often accompanied by loss of elasticity and suppleness. **Difficulty in Tongue Movement:** Tongue movement may be restricted, affecting speech and swallowing. **Altered Taste:** Some individuals with OSMF may experience changes in taste perception [8].

#### Etiological factors:

**Areca nut and Betel quid chewing.** The primary etiological factor for OSMF is the habit of chewing areca nut, often combined with betel leaf and slaked lime. This habit is prevalent in many South Asian countries. **Tobacco Use:** The use of tobacco, particularly in smokeless forms such as gutka or khaini, is another significant risk factor for OSMF. **Spices and Hot Foods:** Consumption of spicy and hot foods may exacerbate the symptoms and discomfort associated with OSMF.

**Diagnostic Approaches-Clinical Examination:** A thorough clinical examination by a healthcare provider is crucial for diagnosing OSMF. This includes assessing mouth opening, the presence of fibrous bands, and any other associated symptoms. **Histopathological Examination:** A biopsy of the affected tissue may be necessary to confirm the diagnosis and rule out malignancy. Histopathological examination can reveal the characteristic fibrosis. **Imaging:** In some cases, imaging studies such as MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) or CT (Computed Tomography) scans may be used to assess the extent of fibrosis and its impact on surrounding structures.

**Evolving Therapeutic Strategies- Tobacco and Areca Nut Cessation:** The most critical aspect of OSMF management is the cessation of areca nut and tobacco use. Behavioral interventions and counseling play a pivotal role in helping individuals quit these habits. **Medical Management:** Medical treatment options include the use of antioxidants, anti-inflammatory drugs, and steroids to reduce inflammation and fibrosis. These treatments aim to alleviate symptoms and slow disease progression. **Physiotherapy:** Physical therapy and mouth-opening exercises may be prescribed to improve mouth opening and maintain oral function. **Surgical Intervention:** In advanced cases with severe trismus and functional impairment, surgical procedures such as release of fibrous bands or grafting may be considered to improve mouth opening. **Regular Follow-up:** Patients with OSMF require long-term follow-up to monitor disease progression, manage symptoms, and provide support for tobacco cessation [9].

## Leukoplakia

**Clinical Characteristics- White Patches:** Leukoplakia presents as white, thickened patches or plaques on the oral mucosa. These patches are often well-defined and may appear raised or flat. **Location:** Leukoplakia can occur on various oral surfaces, including the buccal mucosa (cheeks), tongue, floor of the mouth, and gums. **Texture:** The patches may feel rough or irregular when touched and are sometimes described as having a "keratotic" or "hardened" texture.

**Asymptomatic or Painful:** Leukoplakic lesions can be asymptomatic in many cases, but some individuals may experience discomfort, pain, or burning sensations, especially when consuming spicy or acidic foods [10-13].

#### Etiological factors- tobacco use:

The most significant risk factor for leukoplakia is tobacco use in various forms, including smoking and smokeless tobacco (chewing tobacco or snuff). **Alcohol Consumption:** Heavy alcohol consumption, especially when combined with tobacco use, increases the risk of developing leukoplakia. **Chronic Irritation:** Prolonged exposure to chronic irritants such as rough teeth, dental appliances, or ill-fitting dentures may contribute to the development of leukoplakic lesions. **Viral Infections:** While less common, some viral infections like Human Papillomavirus (HPV) may play a role in the development of leukoplakia [14].

#### Diagnostic approaches:

**Clinical examination-** A thorough clinical examination by a dentist or oral healthcare provider is essential for diagnosing leukoplakia. The appearance and location of the white patches are key diagnostic criteria [15].

#### Biopsy:

To confirm the diagnosis and rule out malignancy, a biopsy of the leukoplakic lesion is often necessary. Histopathological examination of the biopsy sample can determine if dysplasia (abnormal cell changes) is present. **Imaging:** In some cases, imaging studies like CT (Computed Tomography) scans may be recommended to assess the extent of lesions and rule out underlying malignancy [16].

#### Evolving therapeutic strategies:

**Tobacco and Alcohol Cessation-** The most crucial step in managing leukoplakia is the cessation of tobacco and alcohol use. Behavioral interventions and counseling are often necessary to help individuals quit these habits. **Regular Follow-up:** Individuals with leukoplakia require regular follow-up appointments with their healthcare providers to monitor the lesions for changes and assess response to treatment. **Surgical Excision:** In cases where leukoplakia shows severe dysplasia or has not responded to other treatments, surgical removal of the lesion may be recommended. This is often followed by close monitoring for recurrence.

**Laser Therapy-** Laser therapy can be used to remove leukoplakic lesions. It is less invasive than traditional surgery and may be suitable for certain cases.

**Topical Medications-** Some topical medications, such as retinoids

and corticosteroids, have been used to treat leukoplakia. These medications aim to promote tissue healing and reduce inflammation.

#### Photodynamic therapy:

Emerging therapies like photodynamic therapy involve the use of light-activated substances to target and destroy abnormal cells in leukoplakic lesions. Nutritional Supplements: In some cases, dietary supplements containing vitamins and minerals may be recommended to support oral health [17-19].

### Lichen planus

#### Clinical characteristics:

**Skin and Mucosal Lesions-** Lichen Planus (LP) is a chronic inflammatory disorder that can affect the skin, oral mucosa, genitals, nails, and hair. In the oral cavity, it manifests as white, lacy, or reticular lesions, often on the buccal mucosa (cheeks), tongue, gums, and palate. **Symptoms:** Patients with oral lichen planus may experience discomfort, pain, or a burning sensation. Eating, drinking, and oral hygiene practices can exacerbate these symptoms. **Wickham's Striae-** A characteristic feature of LP is the presence of fine white lines or patterns, known as Wickham's striae, within the affected lesions. **Skin Involvement:** In addition to oral involvement, LP can present with skin lesions that are typically pruritic, purple, flat-topped papules, often arranged in a polygonal pattern. **Nail and Scalp Changes:** Nail involvement can lead to ridges, pitting, and dystrophy, while scalp involvement can result in hair loss and scarring [20].

#### Etiological factors:

**Autoimmune Reaction-** Lichen planus is considered an autoimmune disorder, where the immune system mistakenly attacks the body's own tissues. **Genetic Predisposition:** There is evidence to suggest a genetic predisposition to LP, as it can run in families. **Triggering Factors:** While the exact cause remains unclear, LP may be triggered by various factors, including infections, medications, allergens, and stress [21].

#### Diagnostic approaches:

**Clinical Examination-** Diagnosis of oral lichen planus is primarily based on clinical features, such as the characteristic appearance of white reticular lesions with Wickham's striae. **Biopsy:** A biopsy may be performed to confirm the diagnosis and rule out other potentially serious conditions. **Histopathological examination** of tissue samples can reveal the distinctive features of LP. **Patch Testing:** In cases where potential allergens or medications are suspected as triggers, patch testing may be conducted to identify specific sensitivities. **Dermoscopy-** Dermoscopy can aid in diagnosing skin and nail involvement in LP by examining the characteristic features of LP lesions on these surfaces [22].

#### Evolving therapeutic strategies:

**Topical Corticosteroids-** Topical corticosteroids are often the first-line treatment for both skin and oral LP. They help reduce inflammation and alleviate symptoms [23]. **Oral Medications:** In cases of severe or widespread LP, oral medications such as corticosteroids, retinoids, or immune-modulating drugs (e.g.,

cyclosporine) may be prescribed. **Phototherapy-** UV light therapy (phototherapy) may be used for skin and mucosal LP, particularly when other treatments are ineffective or unsuitable. **Topical Immune Modulators:**

Tacrolimus and pimecrolimus are topical calcineurin inhibitors that can be used for oral LP, especially in areas where corticosteroids are less effective. **Pain Management:** Pain relief measures, such as topical anesthetics or mouth rinses, may be recommended to alleviate discomfort associated with oral LP.

#### Stress management:

Stress management techniques can be beneficial, as stress is believed to exacerbate LP symptoms in some individuals. **Regular Monitoring:** LP requires ongoing monitoring and follow-up with healthcare providers to assess the effectiveness of treatment and monitor for potential complications [24].

### CONCLUSION

This comprehensive review of oral precancerous conditions and their management underscores the critical importance of early detection, accurate diagnosis, and timely intervention in preventing the progression to oral cancer. These conditions, often arising from various risk factors, present a significant public health challenge worldwide. The key takeaways from this review can be summarized as follows: **Diverse Spectrum of Conditions:** Oral precancerous conditions encompass a diverse spectrum of pathologies, each with its own etiological factors and clinical presentations. Recognizing the subtle signs and symptoms is crucial for timely intervention. **Risk Factor Awareness:** Understanding the role of risk factors such as tobacco and alcohol use, betel nut chewing, HPV infection, and autoimmune factors is essential for both healthcare providers and patients. **Effective public health initiatives** aimed at raising awareness and promoting lifestyle changes are imperative.

#### Diagnostic precision:

Accurate diagnosis, often involving biopsy and histopathological examination, is pivotal in risk assessment and determining appropriate management strategies. Advances in diagnostic technologies continue to enhance our ability to detect these conditions at an earlier, more treatable stage. **Multidisciplinary Approach:** Managing oral precancerous conditions requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates medical, surgical, and behavioral interventions. Patient education and support for lifestyle modifications, including tobacco cessation, are central to successful management. **Tailored Interventions:** Treatment options should be tailored to the specific condition, considering factors such as lesion characteristics, histopathological findings, and patient preferences. **Emerging therapies,** including laser treatment and immunotherapies, offer promising avenues for management. **Quality of Life:** It is essential to acknowledge the psychosocial impact of these conditions on patients' quality of life. A holistic approach to care should address not only the physical aspects but also the emotional and social well-being of affected individuals.

### Long-term surveillance:

Regular follow-up and surveillance are crucial to monitor the progression or regression of these lesions. This ongoing care is essential in ensuring that any potential malignant transformation is detected and treated promptly.

### Research and public health:

Continued research in this field is vital for improving our understanding of the pathogenesis and management of oral precancerous conditions. Furthermore, robust public health initiatives are needed to educate the public, promote early detection, and encourage healthier lifestyles.

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