Cancer, Oral

The Importance of Early Detection

Your dentist has recent good news about progress against cancer. It is now easier than ever to detect oral cancer early, when the opportunity for a cure is great. Only half of all patients diagnosed with oral cancer survive more than five years.

Your dentist has the skills and tools to ensure that early signs of cancer and pre-cancerous conditions are identified. You and your dentist can fight and win the battle against oral cancer. Know the early signs and see your dentist regularly.

You Should Know

- Oral Cancer often starts as a tiny, unnoticed white or red spot or sore anywhere in the mouth.
- It can affect any area of the oral cavity including the lips, gum tissue, check lining, tongue and the hard or soft palate.
- A change in the way the teeth fit together
- Oral Cancer most often occurs in those who use tobacco in any form.
- **Other signs include:**
    - A sore that bleeds easily or does not heal
    - A color change of the oral tissues
    - A lump, thickening, rough spot, crust or small eroded area
    - Pain, tenderness, or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips
    - Difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw or tongue.
- Alcohol use combined with smoking greatly increases risk.
- Prolonged exposure to the sun increases the risk of lip cancer.
  Oral cancers can occur in people who do not smoke and have no other known risk factors.
  Oral Cancer is more likely to strike after age 40.
  Studies suggest that a diet high in fruits and vegetables may prevent the development of potentially cancerous lesions.

Regular Dental Check-ups Important

Oral cancer screening is a routine part of a dental examination. Regular check-ups, including an examination of the entire mouth, are essential in the early detection of cancerous and pre-cancerous conditions. You may have a very small, but dangerous, oral spot or sore and not be aware of it.

Your dentist will carefully examine the inside of your mouth and tongue and in some patients may notice a flat, painless, white or red spot or a small sore. Although most of these are harmless, some are not.

Harmful oral spots or sores often look identical to those that are harmless, but testing can tell them apart. If you have a sore with a likely cause, your dentist may treat it and ask you to return for re-examination.

Dentists often will notice a spot or sore that looks harmless and does not have a clear cause. To ensure that a spot or sore is not dangerous, your dentist may choose to perform a simple test, such as a brush test. A brush test collects cells from a suspicious lesion in the mouth. The cells are sent to a laboratory for analysis. If precancerous cells are found, the lesion can be surgically removed if necessary during a separate procedure. It's important to know that all atypical and positive results from a brush test must be confirmed by incisional biopsy and histology.

Facts About Oral Cancer

Incidence and Mortality

- Oral cancer strikes an estimated 34,360 Americans each year. An estimated 7,550 people (5,180 men and 2,370 women) will die of these cancers in 2007.[1]
- More than 25% of the 30,000 Americans who get oral cancer will die of the disease.[2]
- On average, only half of those diagnosed with the disease will survive more than five years.[4]
- African-Americans are especially vulnerable; the incidence rate is 1/3 higher than whites and the mortality rate is almost twice as high.[5]

Risk Factors

- Although the use of tobacco and alcohol are risk factors in developing oral cancer, approximately 25% of oral cancer patients have no known risk factors.[6, 7]
- There has been a nearly five-fold increase in incidence in oral cancer patients under age 40, many with no known risk factors.[8, 9, 10, 11]
- The incidence of oral cancer in women has increased significantly, largely due to an increase in women smoking. In 1950 the male to female ratio was 6:1; by 2002, it was 2:1.

Prevention and Detection

- The best way to prevent oral cancer is to avoid tobacco and alcohol use.
- Regular dental check-ups, including an examination of the entire mouth, are essential in the early detection of cancerous and pre-cancerous conditions.
- Many types of abnormal cells can develop in the oral cavity in the form of red or white spots. Some are harmless and benign, some are cancerous and others are pre-cancerous, meaning they can develop into cancer if not detected early and removed. (American Cancer Society)
- Finding and removing epithelial dysplasias before they become cancer can be one of the most effective methods for reducing the incidence of cancer.

- Knowing the risk factors and seeing your dentist for oral cancer screenings can help prevent this deadly disease. Routine use of the Pap smear since 1955, for example, dramatically reduced the incidence and mortality rates for cervical cancer in the United States.[12]
- Oral cancer is often preceded by the presence of clinically identifiable premalignant changes. These lesions may present as either white or red patches or spots. Identifying white and red spots that show dysplasia and removing them before they become cancer is an effective method for reducing the incidence and mortality of cancer.

References

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3. American Cancer Society web page.
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6. Schantz SP, Yu GP. Head and neck cancer incidence trends in young Americans, 1973-1997, with a special analysis for tongue cancer. Arch Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg. Mar 2002;128(3): 268-274.
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8. Shiboski CH, Shiboski SC, Silverman S, Jr. Trends in oral cancer rates in the United States, 1973-1996. Community Dent Oral Epidemiol. Aug 2000;28(4):249-25.
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11. Dahlstrom, K. R et al. Squamous cell carcinoma of the head and neck in never smoker-never drinkers: A descriptive epidemiologic study. Head Neck 2007.
12. American Cancer Society (“In the United States, the cervical cancer death rate declined by 74% between 1955 and 1992, in large part due to the effectiveness of Pap smear screening.”) web facts.

Additional Resources

ADA JADA Patient Page

- Detecting Oral Cancer Early (PDF)

ADA Dental Minute

- Oral Health During Cancer Treatment

National Cancer Institute

- Oral Cancer

  NCI's gateway for information about oral cancer (cancer of the lip or mouth).

National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Institute

- Oral Cancer

  Information on risk factors, examinations and treatment for oral cancer.

American Cancer Society

- Oral Cancer Fact Sheet

  Quitting tobacco and limiting alcohol sharply reduce any risk of oral cancer, even after many years of use. Find oral cancers early with routine screening.