

Checking Up on Oral Cancer

By Thomas Jackson, DDS

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According to the National Cancer Institute, the survival rate for many cancers has increased over the past 25 years. Two very important reasons for this are increased public awareness and the use of screening tests for early detection, which allows patients to obtain more effective treatment with fewer side effects. Patients whose cancers are found early and treated in a timely manner are more likely to survive these cancers than are those whose cancers are not found until symptoms appear.

It is commonplace to annually get a Pap smear for cervical cancer, a mammogram to check for breast cancer, or a digital exam for prostate cancer. Oral cancer is also a highly survivable cancer if detected early through screening exams, and these should be included in an annual health wellness program.

Risk factors for oral cancer

This year, 30,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral cancer, causing over 8,000 deaths. Of these 30,000, only half will be alive in five years. The death rate for oral cancer is higher than that of cervical cancer, Hodgkin's disease, or cancer of the brain, liver, testes, kidney, or skin. The death rate associated with oral cancer is high because currently it is usually discovered late in its development.

There are several types of oral cancers, but 90 percent are squamous cell carcinoma. Tobacco use in all its forms is the number one risk factor in the development of oral cancer—at least 75 percent of those diagnosed are tobacco users.

When tobacco use is combined with the heavy use of alcohol, the risk of developing oral cancer is 15 times greater. Although tobacco use is the leading cause, many other factors including age, family history, ethnicity, and immune system function likely also play a role. Recently, HPV (human papillomavirus) has been linked not only to cervical cancer but to oral cancer as well.

Early detection is key

One of the real dangers of oral cancer is that it can go unnoticed in its early stages. It can be painless, and the early clinical signs subtle. With a thorough head and neck examination given by your dentist, however, lesions can be detected early, and early treatment initiated.

For this reason, a dental examination should not only include checks for dental decay and periodontal disease but also for oral cancer. In addition, those who do not receive regular dental examinations have a greater reason to see a dentist other than to save their teeth: it may be to save their life.

A thorough exam is a must

The oral cancer screening exam is clearly an important component to the dental examination. It will usually include a systematic visual examination of all the soft tissues of the mouth, including a thorough examination of the tongue.

The exam should also include an examination of the lymph nodes surrounding the oral cavity and in the neck. In addition, technologies recently introduced use dyes and special lights to detect abnormal cell activity, which in combination with the screening exam will aid in the early detection of oral cancer.

In my office, we use a new technology called VELscope™. This device utilizes a narrow band of safe, high-energy blue light with specialized filtering technology to disclose mucosal abnormalities before they might be detected by a routine clinical examination.

Make sure to get regular exams

Going to the dentist for routine care and oral cancer screening is an important part of your health and wellness program. Be sure that your dentist completes a regular oral cancer screening—it not only will keep your smile healthy but will keep you alive and well to smile for many years to come. U

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