

Dentists: Physicians of the Mouth

THE SURVIVAL RATE FOR MANY CANCERS has increased over the past 25 years, according to the National Cancer Institute. Two important reasons for this are increased public awareness and the use of screening tests to detect cancers early, which allows patients to obtain effective treatment with fewer side effects. Patients whose cancers are found early and treated in a timely manner are more likely to survive than are those whose cancers are not found until symptoms appear. It is commonplace to 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, which should be included in an annual health wellness program.

This year, 30,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral cancer, causing more than 8,000 deaths. Of the 30,000 newly diagnosed individuals, only half will be alive in five years. The death rate for oral cancer is higher than that of cervical cancer, Hodgkin's disease, cancer of the brain, liver, testes, kidney, or skin cancer. Currently, the death rate associated with oral cancer is high due to the cancer being routinely discovered late in its development. There are several types of oral cancers, but 90 percent are squamous cell carcinoma, which is the second most common cancer of the skin.

Tobacco use in all forms is the No. 1 risk factor in the development of oral cancer. At least 75 percent of the individuals diagnosed with oral cancer 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, other factors such as age, family history, ethnicity, and immune system function likely also play a role. Recently, HPV (human papilloma virus) has not only been linked as a causative agent in cervical cancer but in oral cancer as well.

Dental exams for oral cancer

One of the real dangers of oral cancer is that in its early stages it can go unnoticed. It can be painless and the early clinical signs are subtle. However, with a thorough head and neck examination given by your dentist, lesions can be detected early and early treatment initiated. A dental examination therefore should not only include checks for dental decay and periodontal disease, but for oral cancer as well. 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.

The oral cancer screening exam is an important component to the dental examination. It will usually include a systematic visual examination of all the soft tissues of the mouth, including the extension of the tongue to examine its base, palpation of the floor of the mouth, a digital examination of the borders of the tongue, and the lymph nodes surrounding the oral cavity and in the neck. In addition, there are technologies recently introduced that use dyes and special lights to detect abnormal cell activity, which in

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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combination with the screening exam will aid in the early detection of oral cancer. At The Chicago Center for Cosmetic and Implant Dentistry, we use a new technology called VELscope®, which uses a narrow band of safe, high-energy blue light with specialized filtering technology to disclose mucosal abnormalities prior to routine clinical recognition.

Going to the dentist for routine care and oral cancer screening is an important part of your health and wellness program. It not only will keep your smile healthy but will keep you alive and well to smile for many years to come. U