

Are You at Risk for Oral Cancer?

With a death rate higher than that of cervical cancer, Hodgkins disease, brain, liver, and skin cancer, oral cancer is considered among the most deadly. Of the 30,000 new patients who are diagnosed with oral cancer in the United States each year, only half will survive beyond five years. Such startling statistics stem from the fact that many cases of oral cancer aren't diagnosed until they've reached more advanced, difficult-to-treat stages. Early on, oral cancer is usually painless. For many patients, the diagnosis comes after the tumor has grown or spread to other locations such as the lymph nodes of the neck.

“While symptoms such as sores, patches, and lumps can certainly be harmless, they can also signal oral cancer. If ignored too long, oral cancer can spread to other locations and create very serious health issues,” said Scott Navarro, DDS, a national oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association.

Dentists play a critical role in the detection of oral cancer. In addition to visually examining mouth tissue during exams, many dentists examine the backs of the patients' mouths to search for abnormalities. They'll also feel for swollen lymph nodes and hardened masses and review dental x-rays. While there are a number of methods dentists may use to watch for oral cancer, most agree that one of the most important tools for early detection is the routine dental checkup and vigilance on the part of individuals.

oral health exam

The Oral Cancer Foundation urges people to consult medical professionals if they find any of the following symptoms:

- * Sores or lesions that do not heal within two weeks.
- * Lumps or thickening in the cheeks.
- * White or red patches on gums, tongue, tonsils, or mouth lining.
- * Sore throat or feeling that something is caught in the throat.
- * Difficulty chewing or swallowing.
- * Difficulty moving jaw or tongue.
- * Numbness in tongue or other mouth areas.
- * Swelling of jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable.

Who is more likely to get oral cancer? Not surprisingly, oral cancer most often occurs in those who use tobacco in any form. When tobacco and alcohol use are combined, the risk of oral cancer increases 15 times more than nonusers of tobacco and alcohol products. And oral cancer is more likely to strike after we reach age 40. That doesn't mean people who don't fall into those risk categories can ignore symptoms. Approximately 25 percent of oral cancers occur in people who do not smoke or use smokeless tobacco products. Be alert, and visit your dentist regularly.

