

## ORAL CANCER

When people think about cancer, lung or breast cancer is probably what comes to mind. I feel it is important to address a very serious form of cancer that many people do not often hear about. There are about 28 – 30,000 new cases of oral cancer diagnosed each year, resulting in about 7 – 8,000 deaths annually. The reason death rates are so high is that by the time it is discovered, it has often metastasized to other locations. Oral cancers are also dangerous because they are prone to producing additional primary tumors. It is therefore very important that oral cancer be detected early.

Some of the common symptoms of oral cancer are red or white sores or patches, persistent sores that do not heal within two weeks or unexplained bleeding. Other symptoms can involve difficulty in swallowing, lumps in your mouth or around your neck and persistent pain or loss of feeling inside your mouth.

About ninety per cent of oral cancers are due to smoking or using smokeless tobacco (dip or chew). Excessive alcohol consumption will increase this risk. Exposure to the sun is also a factor in skin cancers as well as cancer of the lip. Oral cancer will more likely occur after the age of forty (but can occur earlier) and males are about twice as likely to develop oral cancer. Twenty-five per cent of oral cancers may be discovered in people without these risk factors.

As part of a dental examination, I perform an oral cancer screening for my patients. During the screening, I will look for any lumps or irregular changes in and around the head, face and neck area. The lips, cheeks, hard and soft palate, tongue and floor of the mouth will be examined for any sores or irregular changes in appearance or color. Should any areas look suspicious, a biopsy may be required.

You should perform a self-exam at least once a month. Examine your head, neck, and the skin on your face for sores or growths and for color, shape or size changes in any moles. You should also explore all areas inside your mouth including under the tongue and the roof of your mouth. Your inspection should be visual as well as feeling for anything unusual by using your fingers to feel for any lumps or bumps. Should you notice anything out of the ordinary, sores that have changed or haven't gone away by two weeks time or you notice suspicious lumps, consult with your dentist or physician.

Prevention of oral cancer involves minimizing the factors that you can control. Do not use tobacco in any form and limit your alcohol consumption. You should also limit your exposure to the sun as well as use sun blocks on your skin and lips. Regularly scheduled dental exams as well as self-exams are crucial. Early detection is very important in fighting this disease.