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Oral Cancer

Oral cancer is particularly dangerous because it can go unnoticed in its preliminary stages. In many cases, however, dentists can detect the disease early, which makes the dental community the first line of defense against oral cancer. Read on to learn more about oral cancer.

What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer is the sixth most common cancer, accounting for nearly 5 percent of all cases. More than 43,000 Americans and 4,000 Canadians will be diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer this year, resulting in more than 8,000 deaths, or about one every hour. If oropharyngeal cancer is included, the number of deaths increases to more than 15,000 per year.

What are its risk factors?

Risk factors for oral cancer include tobacco use, alcohol use, sun exposure (lips), a previous head and neck cancer diagnosis, and human papilloma virus (HPV) infection. HPV can cause cancer in the back of the throat (oropharyngeal cancer), including the base of the tongue and tonsils. About 79 million Americans are infected with HPV, with 14 million people estimated to become newly infected each year. It is possible that HPV vaccines might prevent oropharyngeal cancer.

What are the warning signs of oral cancer?

Oral cancer typically is painless in its early stages but can become painful as it spreads. Go to your dentist immediately if you observe any of the following: changes in the way your teeth fit together; oral sores that bleed easily or don't heal;



lumps, thickening, rough spots, or crusty or eroded areas in your mouth; or difficulty swallowing, chewing, speaking, or moving your jaw or tongue.

How do dentists screen for cancer?

During an oral cancer screening, your dentist will feel for lumps or irregular tissue changes in your neck, head, cheeks, and oral cavity. He or she also will examine the soft tissues in your mouth, looking for sores or discolored tissues. He or she also may use screening devices that use rinses, dyes, or different types of lights to detect abnormal cells. It's important to remember that your dentist does not necessarily think you have oral cancer if he or she performs a screening. An oral cancer screening is part of a routine dental checkup, even when you have no symptoms.

How is oral cancer treated?

Methods of treatment for oral cancer include surgery, radiation therapy, and/or chemotherapy. This treatment is

determined in conjunction with your physician.

How can I prevent oral cancer?

To help prevent oral cancer, abstain from using all forms of tobacco and avoid excessive sun exposure and alcohol consumption. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all preteen boy and girls ages 11 to 12 be vaccinated for HPV, which may aid in reducing the risk of oral cancer. The vaccines also are recommended for males through age 21 and for females through age 26, if they did not receive them as preteens. Because successful treatment and rehabilitation of oral cancer are dependent on early detection, it is extremely important to regularly check your mouth for any changes and to maintain regular dental visits, at least every six months.

For more information about oral cancer, talk with your dentist.