

Oral Cancer

Oral cancer or cancers which occur in the mouth begin when cells on your lips or in your mouth develop changes or mutations in their DNA. These mutations cause these cells to grow and divide. These cancer cells can form a tumor and with time they may spread to other areas of the mouth and on to other areas of the head and neck or other parts of the body. Oral cancer is the sixth most common cancer in the world and approximately 12,000 Americans die of oral cancer each year. Based on NCI's SEER Cancer Statistics Review from 2003-2007, the median age at diagnosis for cancer of the oral cavity and pharynx was 62 years of age. The overall 5-year relative survival for 1999-2006 from 17 SEER geographic areas was 60.9%. The survival rate when the cancer was found to be localized was at 82.5%. As it spread to regional lymph nodes the rate dropped to 54.7% and once the cancer spread to other parts of the body the rate fell to 32.2%. The earlier that oral cancer is spotted the greater the chances for survival. This underscores the importance of getting an oral cancer screening which is performed every 6 months at your dental check up.

During your dental checkup your dentist will look at your lips, the soft tissues of your cheeks and palate (the roof of your mouth) and will look at the top as well as the bottom of your tongue and the floor of your mouth. Common areas for oral cancer to develop are on the tongue and the floor of the mouth. Oral cancer may appear as a white or red patch of tissue in the mouth, or a small hard ulcer which can look like a common canker sore which does not heal. Other signs and symptoms include bleeding, problems with pain or swallowing, a lump in your mouth or neck, difficulty speaking, wart like masses or any numbness in the oral or facial region. It is important to have any lesion, sore or discolored area of your mouth, which does not heal or go away within 14 days, looked at by a professional. If your dentist or doctor decides that an area is suspicious, the only way to know for sure if it is cancer, is to do a biopsy of the area. When a biopsy is performed your doctor or dentist may remove a sample of cells for laboratory testing. The area can be scraped with a brush much like a pap smear or cut away using a scalpel. In the laboratory, the cells are analyzed for cancer or precancerous changes that indicate a risk of future cancer.

Risk factors that can increase your risk of mouth cancer include tobacco use of any kind, including cigarettes, cigars, pipes, and chewing tobacco. Studies have shown that the death rate from oral cancer is about four times higher for cigarette smokers than for nonsmokers. Other risk factors include, heavy alcohol use, excessive sun exposure to your lips, a sexually transmitted virus called human papillomavirus (HPV) and previous cancer or radiation treatments in the head or neck area

While there is no proven way to prevent mouth cancer you can reduce your risk of mouth cancer by quitting tobacco use or by not starting and avoiding all tobacco use. Smoking or chewing tobacco exposes the cells in your mouth to dangerous cancer-causing chemicals. If you drink alcohol, drink alcohol only in moderation. Alcohol use together with smoking acts as a co-carcinogen, enhancing the effects of tobacco smoke. Avoid excessive sun exposure to your lips. Protect the skin on your lips from the sun and apply a sunscreen lip product as part of your routine sun protection regimen. See your dentist regularly. As part of a routine dental exam, your dentist will inspect your entire mouth for abnormal areas that may indicate mouth cancer or precancerous changes.

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