



Health Awareness

Fighting Oral Cancer With Early Detection

(NAPSA)—Most people know they can screen themselves at home by performing self-breast exams or checking moles for abnormalities. However, many people are unaware that they can also examine themselves for oral cancer. As oral cancer is most treatable if detected early, it is important for people to have regular dental visits and to learn how to do self-exams.

What is oral cancer?

Oral cancer is any cancer of the mouth or pharynx, a part of the throat. According to National Cancer Institute estimates, approximately 34,000 Americans will have been diagnosed with cancer of the oral cavity and pharynx in 2007.

“Awareness of signs and symptoms of oral cancer is essential, because if caught early, there is a much greater likelihood of survival,” says Michael Kahn, DDS, professor of oral pathology at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in Boston. “Self-screening for oral cancer is quick and easy, and can potentially save your life.”

Risk factors for oral cancer

“Although risk is greater for those who use tobacco products, it is a misconception that others are not at risk,” says Dr. Kahn.

Besides use of tobacco in any form, other risk factors for oral cancer include:

- Gender: Men are twice as likely to develop oral cancer as women.
- Age: Oral cancer most often develops after age 40.
- Alcohol use: Excessive alcohol use increases risk of oral cancer,



Photo courtesy of the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research.

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cer, especially when used in combination with tobacco.

- Sunlight: Excessive sun exposure increases the risk of lip cancer.
- Human papillomavirus: The same kind that can cause cervical cancer in women has been found to cause some oral cancers in both men and women.

Screening for oral cancer

No matter your potential risk, Dr. Kahn strongly recommends checking for suspicious areas in your mouth about once a month. “Use a mirror to look inside your mouth, including the roof, cheeks, lips, gums and under the tongue. Examine for any white or red spot that stands out from the normal color of your mouth. Even if the spot is painless, consult your dentist promptly if it doesn’t go away within a week or two.

“It is also important to schedule semiannual visits with your dentist, as they are trained to look for oral cancer,” says Dr. Kahn. “At these visits, talk with your dentist about inspecting your mouth for suspicious areas. If you

use tobacco products, you may also want to discuss visiting a specialist who can examine your pharynx.”

Other signs and symptoms of oral cancer, per the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, may include:

- A sore, irritation, lump or thick patch in your mouth, lip or throat;
- A feeling that something is caught in your throat;
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing or moving your jaw or tongue;
- Numbness in your tongue or other areas of your mouth;
- Swelling of your jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable;
- Pain in one ear without hearing loss.

What can I do to prevent oral cancer?

“About 75 percent of cases of oral cancer are preventable,” says Dr. Kahn. “The best prevention is to avoid tobacco products and, if you currently use them, stop as soon as possible.”

Other methods of prevention include:

- Making regular dental appointments;
- Limiting alcohol intake;
- Using a lip balm with an SPF when out in the sun;
- Eating a healthful diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables;
- Self-screening for oral cancer.

“Above all, people should know that self-screening is a priceless prevention tool,” says Dr. Kahn. “Catching a suspicious area early can make a world of difference.”