

Oral Health Tips

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Oral Cancer: Do You Know the Signs?

Did you know that dentists can look for signs of oral cancer during routine dental exams? Regular dental check-ups should include an examination of the entire mouth for early detection of cancerous and pre-cancerous conditions.

You also should know what to look for while brushing and flossing. See your dentist immediately if you observe any of the telltale signs listed below. Oral cancer will be diagnosed in more than 30,000 Americans this year and will cause approximately 8,000 deaths. Only half of all patients diagnosed with oral cancer survive more than five years, mostly because it isn't detected early enough.

Check Your Mouth Frequently

- Oral cancer can affect the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, tongue, and/or the hard or soft palate
- Any sore that bleeds easily and persists longer than two weeks
- Swelling, lump, rough spot, crust or small-eroded area anywhere in or around the mouth or neck
- White or red patches in the mouth or on the lips
- Pain, tenderness, or numbness
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw, or tongue
- A change in the way the teeth fit together

What to Expect in an Oral Exam

- If the sore has a likely cause, the dentist may treat it and request a return visit.
- Spots that may look harmless, but don't have a clear cause should be tested.

- A diagnostic tool called a brush biopsy is a method used as a quick, usually painless way to check for abnormal cells.

Risk Factors

- **Tobacco/Alcohol Use** Cigarettes, cigars, pipes, and smokeless tobacco increase the risk of oral cancer — even more so with the combination of alcohol use.
- **Sunlight** Prolonged exposure to the sun increases risk for lip cancer.
- **Age** Those over age 40 are the most vulnerable.
- **Gender** Oral cancer affects men twice as often as it does women.
- **Race** African Americans, especially males, are at greater risk of death from oral cancer. Oral cancers do occur in people who do not use tobacco or who have no other known identifiable risk factors. That's why it is important to have regular oral examinations that include an oral cancer check-up — catching a potential problem early can make a big difference in the outcome.

Sources: Academy of General Dentistry: www.agd.org; American Dental Association: www.ada.org; National Institutes of Health: www.nih.gov; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov



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