

Oral Cancer: A Deadly Surprise

You know how serious melanoma skin cancer and uterine cancer are. Did you know that each year more people die of oral cancer than either of these? Oral cancer also kills more than Hodgkin's disease, or cancers of the brain, liver, testes, or kidneys. In fact the American Cancer Society estimates the chances of a U.S. male developing oral cancer in his lifetime a 1 in 72.

Why is the death rate so high in a type of cancer that most people have never heard of? There are two main reasons. Oral cancer is usually not discovered until late in the progression of the disease, often not until after it has spread. You would think that since the mouth can be looked into, that it would be discovered earlier. The problem is that it usually shows up as a very small red or white spot far back in the mouth. In fact the very base of the tongue, a location that can only be inspected at a dental exam, is the most common location. By the time any kind of "mass" can be detected by the patient, the cancer has been growing a long time.

The second reason the death rate is so high is the tendency for the cancer to recur in the mouth. The five year survival rate unfortunately is only about 50%. Those survivors are at 20 times greater risk for developing new oral cancer than the general population.

Who gets oral cancer? Anybody can develop oral cancer, but most victims are over 40 years old. Approximately twice as many men as women will develop it. Unfortunately oral cancer is almost twice as prevalent in the black population and their death rates are almost twice as high as well.

So what are the risk factors? The biggest factor is tobacco use, smoking or dipping. The more years of exposure to the toxic chemicals in tobacco, the greater the likelihood of cancer to develop. For you dippers, precancerous lesions, with the potential to turn into cancer, often develop after just a few years of use. The second greatest factor is regular alcohol use. People who both smoke and drink regularly have a 15 times greater risk than people who abstain or who are only occasional users. A recently found smaller risk factor is a certain type of human papilloma virus that causes cervical cancer and is transmitted sexually.

Do avoiding these risk factors guarantee that a person won't get oral cancer? Unfortunately, the answer is no. In fact, I personally knew someone who had no risk factors, yet died of oral cancer.

Obviously, the best treatment is prevention. Don't use tobacco and don't drink regularly. The next best treatment comes with early detection. Really, the only means of early detection for any area inside the lips is your regular dental examination. Your dentist should be carefully examining the tissues of your mouth at least once a year. Whether you have all or none of your natural teeth, you need to be examined. Your dentist needs to be examining your lips, cheeks, vestibules, gums, soft palate, hard palate, floor of

mouth, and the top, bottom, sides, and base of your tongue at least once a year. If not you are truly living dangerously.