

The Indicators for Oral Cancer



Nobody wants to get any form of cancer, including oral cancer. But if you do develop oral cancer, it's better to find out as soon as possible.

This is a form of cancer that usually spreads fast. If caught during the first two stages, the chance for a cure is 90 percent. If caught during stages III or IV, which is what happens 70 percent of the time, the five-year survival rate is only 57 percent. Clearly, your odds are much better with early detection.

Every year, about 35,000 people are told they have oral cancer. You are more likely to die if you have oral cancer than you are if you have several other cancers, such as Hodgkin's disease, cervical

cancer, or cancer involving the brain, kidney, liver, ovary, or testes. Although lifestyle plays a role — people who smoke and drink are more likely to develop oral cancer than people who don't — 27 percent of those with oral cancer do not drink, smoke, or have other risk factors associated with the illness.

What are the risk factors?

- ▶ You already know about drinking and smoking. Those who use tobacco, including prod-

ucts that are not smoked, such as chewing tobacco, are at greater risk. Heavy drinkers are, too; in other words, any man who drinks two or more drinks per day, and any woman who drinks more than one drink per day.

- ▶ Spending too much time in the sun increases your risk. You can develop cancer on your lips.
- ▶ Some forms of the human papillomavirus can increase your chances of oral cancer.
- ▶ Eating too few fruits and vegetables increases your risk.
- ▶ Once you develop oral cancer, you are more likely to get it again later.

You might want to ask your dentist to screen you for oral cancer when you come in for your twice-yearly checkup. Some dentists don't think to check for this problem, so it's good to make sure that the dentist is aware of your concern. If you or your dentist notice any of the following indicators, then more attention is warranted:

- ▶ A patch (red or white).
- ▶ A sore that doesn't seem to be healing. You should also pay attention to whether the sore seems to bleed easily, because that is another indicator.
- ▶ A lump, or a spot in your mouth where the tissue is either thicker or harder than normal.
- ▶ An area in the mouth that is rough or crusted.
- ▶ A change in your bite.
- ▶ Numbness, pain, or tenderness.
- ▶ Problems with chewing, swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or the tongue.
- ▶ Abnormalities in the mouth, face, or neck.

If your dentist sees a problem, the dentist may wait a couple of weeks to do a biopsy in order to give the problem a short opportunity to clear up on its own. The dentist may also want you to go see another dentist or a doctor.

Oral cancer is a serious problem, but your dentist can help you detect its onset early enough to make a difference. You might not think of your dentist as someone who can literally save your life, but when it comes to oral cancer, that is exactly the role your dentist might fill.