



TOOTHFULLY SPEAKING!

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For the dental community, April is Oral Health Month. But it's also Cancer Awareness Month, attested by displays of sunny daffodils, as well as wrist bands proclaiming "I Love Boobies!"

Oral cancer is the most common head and neck cancer. 45,000 people in North America and 650,000 people worldwide are diagnosed every year - a statistic that has consistently risen over the last 5 years. The hollywood actor Michael Douglas was diagnosed, treated and cured of tongue cancer (the most commonly affected area of the mouth) and is now a spokesman for the non profit OCF (Oral Cancer Foundation). Examples such as his are bringing further awareness to the importance of early detection.

Tobacco, including smokeless varieties, increases the risk of oral cancer fifty times. Heavy drinkers have rates six times higher. While these two culprits are well-known, HPV16 (human papillomavirus, the main cause of cervical cancer) has recently emerged as another major risk factor, accounting for up to 25% of victims. 7% of cases are likely genetic and excessive sun exposure may also play a role.

Oral cancer is treatable, fortunately, but early diagnosis is critical. Treatment is 80-90% successful if caught in time, but the 5 year survival is only 50% when diagnosed late. In the US 1 person dies every hour of oral cancer, due to a lack of public awareness and infrequent dental exams. Mortality rates are decreasing for cervical, skin, breast and prostate cancers due to early screening and detection programs, whereas oral cancer rates are increasing. Obviously much work has yet to be done.

SELF DETECTION is paramount. High risk areas are the sides of the tongue near the back, the floor of the mouth under the tongue and the gums. Early signs commonly overlooked or misdiagnosed are:

1. Hoarseness, chronic sore throat, change in voice or ear pain.
2. Swellings, lumps, bumps or rough spots/crusts/eroded areas on the lips, gums, or other areas inside the mouth.
3. The development of velvety white, red, or speckled (white and red) patches in the mouth.
6. Unexplained bleeding in the mouth.
7. Unexplained numbness, loss of feeling, or pain/tenderness in any area of the face, mouth, or neck.
8. Persistent sores on the face, neck, or mouth that bleed easily and do not heal within 2 weeks.
9. A feeling that something is caught in the back of the throat, difficulty chewing or swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or tongue.
10. A change in the way your teeth or dentures fit together.

DEVELOP GOOD HABITS: Don't smoke or use any tobacco products, drink alcohol in moderation, refrain from binge drinking, eat a well-balanced diet, and when in the sun, use UV protection on your skin as well as your lips.

BE PROACTIVE: The American Cancer Society recommends cancer exams every 3 years for 20 year olds and yearly after 40. As cancer affects the soft tissues not the teeth, denture wearers are prone to being overlooked. At your next dental appointment ask your dentist how to perform a self exam. Follow up if you notice any changes in the appearance of your mouth or any of the signs and symptoms listed above. Be proactive NOT reactive. Knowledge, awareness and self-diagnosis are our most powerful weapons against the increasing rates of oral cancer.



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