**April is Oral Cancer Awareness Month**

There has never been a better time to get screened for oral cancer

The leading cause of oral cancer has almost always been attributed to lifelong tobacco use by older males – and while smoking and tobacco use is still a major risk factor, the fastest growing segment or oral cancer patients are sadly young, healthy, nonsmokers. In the fight against oral cancer it is good to know that dentists are often the first line of defense through the process of early discovery.

**Oral Cancer Facts**

Oral cancer is not only on the rise, it’s raging across America. For the past five years there has been an alarming increase in the rate of occurrence of oral cancers. And, in 2007 there was a significant jump of over 11 percent in that year alone. As many as 42,000 Americans will be newly diagnosed this year.

**Are you at risk?**

In the early stages of oral cancer’s development there is rarely pain or any obvious symptom, which unfortunately makes this disease a very dangerous disease – a silent killer, in fact. The best way to ensure that you do not become another cancer statistic yourself is to include an oral cancer screening in your annual dental check-up.

Oral cancer is often the instigator of diseases commonly known as mouth cancer, tongue cancer, tonsil cancer and throat cancer. People who have oral cancer generally share some common traits including;

* tobacco and alcohol use
* exposure to the HPV-16 virus (human papilloma virus version 16)
* genetic predisposition – (under 7 percent of all oral cancer patients)

**You can nip oral cancer in the bud**

Not all of the news about oral cancer is bad news. When it is diagnosed in the early stages, oral cancer patients have an 80-90 percent survival rate. Like other cancer screenings, screening for oral cancer can be the most effective means of discovering it while it is still a very treatable, and survivable disease. The procedure for oral cancer screening is the least invasive and quickest screening you can get. It is painless and quite inexpensive, and best of all it can be done as part of a regular dental check-up.

**What to watch out for**

The following list of symptoms provided by the [Oral Cancer Foundation](http://oralcancerfoundation.org/) can be early indicators of oral cancer so always check with your doctor or dentist immediately if you notice any of the following symptoms:

* A sore or lesion in the mouth that does not heal within two weeks.
* A lump or thickening in the cheek.
* A white or red patch on the gums, tongue, tonsil, or lining of the mouth.
* A sore throat or a feeling that something is caught in the throat.
* Difficulty chewing or swallowing.
* Difficulty moving the jaw or tongue.
* Numbness of the tongue or other area of the mouth.
* Swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable.
* Chronic hoarseness.

These symptoms may be caused by less serious problems, but they can also indicate the possible presence of oral cancer.

**The Oral Cancer Screening Tests**

Most dentists recommend an oral exam during an annual dental visit to screen for oral cancer. The exam itself only takes a few minutes and is easy to incorporate into a routine checkup. An oral exam will help to point out potential white patches, red patches, ulcerations, lumps and loose teeth. With gloved hands, a careful examination of the floor of the mouth and portions of the back of the throat will also be conducted to search for any potential problems. And a review of dental x-rays can help to uncover other possible abnormalities. Other tests dentists may use include;

Rinsing the mouth with a dye before an exam

This test involves applying a harmless blue dye to the inside of the mouth or the use of a blue dye rinse before the exam. Abnormal cells may take up the dye and appear bluer. However, the blue dye itself cannot distinguish between cancerous cells and noncancerous cells but it can help to highlight problem areas in the mouth. This type of test is best conducted where there in an indication of a very high risk of oral cancer.

Shining a light in the mouth during an exam

This method is conducted using a special light to examine the inside of the mouth. With varying degrees of accuracy and results the device emits a blue-spectrum light that causes the soft tissues of the mouth to naturally fluoresce. The device is thought to detect a wide variety of abnormalities, potentially aiding in the discovery of problem areas before they are visible to the unassisted eye.

While an annual screening for oral cancer is important - and can be lifesaving in some circumstances - we recommend that if you notice any long lasting change in the mouth or throat, something that doesn’t feel quite right, seek immediate advice from a doctor or dentist right away. The life you save could be your own.

*The Oral Cancer Foundation is a national public service, non-profit entity designed to reduce suffering and save lives through prevention, education, research, advocacy, and patient support activities.*

*More information:*

What is the best way to screen for oral cancer? Are special oral cancer screening tests better than an oral exam? <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/oral-cancer/AN01704>

The Oral Cancer Foundation <http://oralcancerfoundation.org/>

Cancer survivor Michael Douglas talks about Oral Cancer <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=L_3S_93_jGE>