

Talk to your dentist about oral cancer

A cancer diagnosis is never welcome news. According to the American Cancer Society, more than a third of all women and nearly half of all men in the United States will hear this devastating news during their lifetimes. This group includes the nearly 31,000 Americans who are diagnosed with oral cancer each year. Yet oral cancer is one of the more treatable cancers when it is detected in its early stages.

Why early detection matters

Less than half of all oral cancer patients fully recover, and those who do often experience facial disfigurement or other life-altering complications. More than 9,000 Americans die from oral cancer each year, and the five-year survival rate has stagnated at only 57 percent for the last 40 years. Early diagnosis of oral cancer is the answer; if caught early, the five-year survival rate jumps to 81 percent.

What you should know

Oral cancer can occur in any part of your mouth, including your gums, cheeks, tongue, and lips. It can be difficult to detect because it often begins as a small red or white spot. Other suspicious symptoms can include mouth sores that do not heal.

People who use tobacco products or consume excessive amounts of alcohol tend to have a higher risk for oral cancer, and those who use tobacco products *and* consume excessive alcohol have the highest risk. Yet 25 percent of oral cancer patients have no known risk factors. The fastest growing segments of the U.S. population being diagnosed are young people and women.

What you can do

Many people visit their dentist more frequently than their physician. This puts dental professionals in a unique position to detect many diseases, including oral cancer.

In addition to doing a thorough examination, your dentist can use a quick and painless diagnostic tool called a brush biopsy to test any unexplained red or white spots in your mouth. This tool can identify and analyze both precancerous and cancerous cells. Other types of biopsies may also be done if the dentist believes they are indicated.

Remember, prevention and early detection are the keys to keeping oral cancer at bay—and maybe even saving your life.