The Facts About Oral Cancer

Your dentist checks for signs of oral cancer during your appointment. This can help you discover any issues early — and early detection dramatically improves the chances of a healthy outcome and can often make treatment less extensive. Mouth and throat cancers are twice as common for men as for women.

Oral cancer warning and signs.

You should go to the dentist if you experience the following symptoms:

- Mouth sores or irritation that doesn't go away
- Red or white patches
- Pain or numbness around your mouth and lips
- Lumps, thickening, rough spots, or small eroded areas
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking, or otherwise moving your tongue and/or jaw
- Any changes in how your teeth fit together when you close your mouth
- Dentures that rapidly start to fit poorly or become uncomfortable

What to expect at the dentist

During your regular exam, your dentist will look for these warning signs by checking your lips, gums, tongue, cheek lining, and the roof and floor of your mouth. They will also examine your throat, including your tonsils and feel your jaw and neck for any lumps or abnormalities. Finally, your dentist will ask you about current and past health-related behaviors and your medical history.

Preventing oral cancer

A healthy lifestyle can help you reduce your risk of oral cancer.

- Don't use tobacco or vaping products. Use of tobacco products greatly increases a person's likelihood of mouth and throat cancer. This includes all tobacco products, which can also contribute to severe gum disease, and result in tooth loss. Contrary to common belief, vaping is no safer than tobacco.

- Limit alcohol consumption. Those who drink more than two alcoholic beverages per day are more than likely to develop oral cancer than those who consume alcohol infrequently or not at all.
- Know your personal and family health history. If you or a family member have had cancer in the past, it could increase your risk for certain cancers, including oral cancer.
- Protect yourself from exposure to the sun. UV rays are a common cause of lip cancer. Use a water-resistant lip balm with SPF 30 or higher and remember to reapply regularly.
- Practice good oral health. Attend your regularly scheduled cleanings so your dentist can discover any warning signs early. Maintaining good oral health may also reduce your risk of oral cancer.

Those who use both tobacco and alcohol have about 30 times higher risk for developing oral cancer. Remember, your oral health is tied to your overall health. Make it a priority to attend every appointment with the dentist and other regular medical checkups so you are more likely to catch any health issues early.

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