

WOMEN CLOSE THE ORAL CANCER Gender Gap

According to recent findings, the Oral Cancer Foundation (OCF) concludes that oral cancer rates among women and young people have increased. In the past, the overwhelming majority of oral cancers occurred in men and was diagnosed during middle age, usually attributed to tobacco use (smoking and chewing) and excessive alcohol consumption. Although still primarily found in men over 45 years of age, oral cancer rates have closed the gender gap. While once, one female case was reported for every six male cases, now, one in every two cases reported is a woman. The OCF indicates that this increase is mainly associated with greater tobacco and alcohol use among women. In addition to this disturbing trend, new data indicates that young people—both male and female—are now at a greater risk for oral cancer, often due to exposure to the human papillomavirus 16 (HPV 16)—a strain of the sexually transmitted virus previously connected with an increased risk of cervical cancers.

These new findings make visual screening during routine dental exams more important than ever. A quick visual survey of the mouth, gums, throat, tongue, and lips by a dental professional may be a patient's best defense against oral cancers, as early detection is crucial to effective treatment. The OCF reports that early detection increases a person's survival rate to between 80 and 90 percent of those diagnosed with oral cancer or precancerous abnormalities. Later detection and treatment can decrease one's survival rate to 50 percent. A trained dental professional can detect early warning signs of precancerous and cancerous growths by simply viewing the mouth, but may augment the exam with a fluorescent rinse or a special device called a VELscope that casts a bluish light; both of these methods may expose abnormalities that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Also important to fighting oral cancer is an understanding of your risk factors. Tobacco users and alcohol drinkers are at the greatest risk, but sexually active young people—especially those diagnosed with HPV 16—are now considered at increased risk. In addition, excessive sun exposure may contribute to your risk, as the lips are very vulnerable to solar radiation, and skin cancers may spread into the mouth. And keep in mind that men over 45 years of age are still considered to be at the greatest risk.

According to the OCF, the following are some of the major risk factors and signs of oral cancer:

Oral Cancer Risk Factors

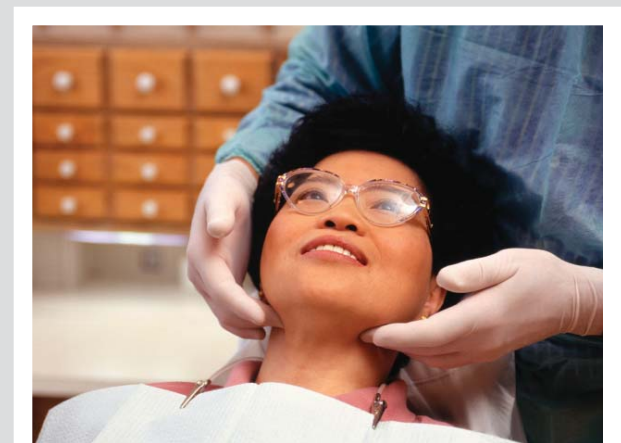
- Smoking/Tobacco Use
- Excessive Alcohol Consumption
- Age/Gender
- HPV 16
- Excessive Sun Exposure

Oral Cancer Signs

- Bleeding
- White Patches
- Redness
- Persistent Sores
- Unusual Swelling
- Persistent Sore Throat



Regardless of age, sex, or risk factors, an oral cancer screening should be part of a comprehensive and regular dental examination. Current dental guidelines recommend twice-a-year checkups and cleanings, at which time oral cancer screenings should be performed. While the OCF reports the number of oral cancer diagnoses at 35,000 new cases a year, new data indicates this total will continue to rise. But with proper and early detection during routine dental exams, these cases may be treated with lifesaving results.



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