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The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

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Your comments and suggestions regarding *WORD OF MOUTH* are always welcome. All correspondence and requests for additional copies may be sent to:

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Oral and Throat Cancer: What You Should Know

Cancer can develop in or around the mouth or in the throat. Cancer that develops on the lips, in the front of the mouth or tongue, under the tongue, or on the insides of the cheeks is called oral cancer. Cancer in the back of the mouth, including the throat, the back part of the tongue, the soft part of the roof of the mouth, and the tonsils is called oropharyngeal cancer.

Chances of survival from head and neck cancers are very good if they are treated before they spread to other parts of the body. Two keys to help you avoid or spot the disease early are knowing what puts you at risk and recognizing the signs and symptoms of these cancers.

WHAT PUTS YOU AT RISK?

Some people are at higher risk of oral and oropharyngeal cancers than others. For example, men develop these cancers more often than women. They also are more common after age 65. Some behaviors can increase the risk, such as:

- Tobacco use
- Heavy alcohol use (more than four drinks per day)

People who do both—use tobacco and drink heavily—significantly increase the risk of developing these cancers.

There are other risks specific to certain types of cancer. Spending a lot of time in the sun increases the risk of developing lip cancer, for example. And the human papilloma virus (HPV) has been associated with oropharyngeal cancer. Children as young as pre-teens can get HPV, but the cancer may not develop until years later, as late as the mid-50s.

Because HPV-associated cancers are preventable, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that children as young as 9 years old get vaccinated against HPV. Talk to your dentist or physician about whether the vaccine is right for you or your child.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

You know your body better than anyone. If you notice any of these signs, talk to your dentist or physician:

- A sore on the lips or in the mouth that does not heal
- Red or white patches in the mouth that don't go away

- Pain, tenderness, or numbness on the lips or in the mouth
- A lump, thickening, or swelling in or around the mouth or throat
- A rough, crusty, or eroded area on the lips
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or tongue
- A change in the way your teeth fit together when you close your mouth or the way your dentures fit
- A cough or sore throat that won't go away
- Earaches
- Hoarseness or other changes in your voice
- Trouble opening your mouth fully

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF?

There are some things you can do that could help limit the risk of developing oral or oropharyngeal cancer:

- Avoid tobacco
- Avoid or limit the use of alcohol
- Don't use tobacco and alcohol together
- Keep an eye on your lips and mouth for anything unusual
- Avoid spending large amounts of time in the sun
- Talk to your doctor or dentist about the HPV vaccine

Also, see your dentist regularly. He or she can complete an oral exam to check for signs or symptoms of cancer.

CONCLUSION

Oral and oropharyngeal cancer is easiest to beat if it is treated early. Watch for any signs that could signal a problem. Avoid behaviors that can increase the risk of these cancers. If you are between 9 and 26 years of age (or if recommended for you when older), ask your dentist or physician about getting vaccinated against HPV. And see your dentist regularly, so he or she can help look for anything unusual.

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References available on request by contacting Melissa Carman at mcarman@massdental.org.