

Oral Cancer: More Common than You Might Think



**By: Robert H. Peterson,
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My desire to practice dentistry stemmed, in large part, from my aunt's death as a result of non-diagnosed oral cancer. Her early and untimely death could, today, probably be prevented by a quick, but thorough, dental exam designed specifically to detect oral cancer.

Oral cancer can form in any part of your mouth or throat. Most oral cancers begin on the lateral borders of the tongue and in the floor of the mouth. Anyone can get oral cancer, but the risk has historically been higher if you're a male over the age of 40 who uses alcohol or tobacco. However, like my aunt, oral cancer can be present in an individual without any of the above risk factors.

But today the traditional risk factors seem to be shifting. As reported by the Oral Cancer Foundation, oral cancers are now being diagnosed more frequently in non-smokers under the age of 50. One new culprit recently identified is the HPV virus, most strains of which are harmless. However, approximately one percent of those infected have HPV16, the agent found to cause oral and other cancers. Nutrition has also been cited as a possible precursor to oral cancer; namely, that a diet low in fruits and vegetables lacks the helpful anti-oxidants that protect the body

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from carcinogenic elements. Research on the causes of oral cancer are ongoing.

Symptoms of oral cancer may include:

- White, red, or red and white patches in your mouth that are not easily wiped away and persist for more than two weeks
- Mouth sores that won't heal
- Bleeding in your mouth
- Loose teeth
- Difficulty swallowing
- An abnormal taste in your mouth

the worst-case result, other unpleasant affects of late-diagnosed oral cancer can be permanent disfigurement after surgical treatment and the spreading of cancer to other parts of the body.

The best prevention is to have your dentist perform an oral cancer screening at your next checkup. These exams are painless and quick. In the exam, your dentist or dental hygienist will do the following:

- Massage the sides of your neck and the area under your jaw to detect enlarged lymph nodes
- Inspect areas under and around your tongue as well as the tongue
- Look around your mouth for discoloration or unusual lumps

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Oral cancer is treatable and, like most cancers, the earlier its detected, the more positive the outcome. I wish more people would visit their dentist simply to have this test performed, which could possibly save their life.

Dr. Peterson maintains a private practice in St. Peters, MO. with his wife, Janelle, who is also a dentist.

They're currently looking forward to the arrival of their fourth child due in June. They offer a wide variety of dental services for patients of all ages.

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