Why You Should Ask Your Dentist for an Oral Cancer Screening

By DR. MATTHEW STEINBERG, DDS

As of the year 2012, Cancer is the leading cause of death in the world. One out of every two males and one out of every three females will develop cancer in their lifetimes. While survival rates have increased for almost all cancers, oral cancer survival rates have not improved. Oral cancer is the sixth most common cancer, accounting for nearly 5 percent of all cancer cases. More than 43,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer this year, resulting in more than 8,000 deaths - that is one every hour.

The most effective method to date to increase the survival rate of cancer is early detection. If the cancer is caught in Stage I or II, the patient has a greater than 80 percent survival rate at 5 years. The true problem is late stage discovery--63 percent of oral cancers are found in late stage and after the cancer has metastasized. This results in a survival rate less than 50 percent.

A new screening tool has recently been introduced to the dental profession, which has been used in screening for cervical cancer at MD Anderson in Houston, and it is the use of fluorescence technology. This fluorescence technology allows detection of dysplasia and early cancers before they can be observed with the conventional visual examination using white light. Healthy mucosal tissue naturally fluoresces without the need for added dyes or chemicals. Similarly, a loss of fluorescence is observed in abnormal tissues and they appear dark as they absorb the wavelength of light. When performing an oral cancer examination with fluorescence and a dark area is noted the protocol is to have the patient back within in two weeks and re-access the area using the fluorescence light. If the darkness does not appear then it is noted, and at the six-month wellness exam the screening is again preformed. If the darkness remains then a non-invasive and painless Brush Cytology is performed and sent to a lab to be evaluated. If the test comes back positive a physician or oral surgeon referral is made for a tissue biopsy. If it comes back negative then it is again noted and the screening is again performed at the six-month wellness exam.
The dental community is the first line of defense against oral cancer and there are many volunteer non-profit organizations that are now committed to teaching dentists how to perform thorough oral cancer head and neck screening examinations. The advantage of having dentists be the key screening professionals is that people visit a dentist one to two times a year and spend about an hour in an oral health wellness examination appointment with the hygienist to have the bacteria removed from their teeth. The oral cancer screening is fast becoming a staple of this appointment.

As oral cancer is most often associated with tobacco use, alcohol use, people over 45 and chronic tissue traumas; however, there is a new risk factor that is causing oral cancers in young non-smokers: HPV. A major connection has been discovered between the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and it is the fastest growing oral cancer population.

**Facts About HPV and Oral Cancer**

*3 out of 4 people are infected with HPV at some point in their lives.*

*Oral HPV increases your risk for oral cancer fifty fold.*

*Any prior infection with HPV-16 increases your risk for oral cancer nine fold.*

*Having 6 or more sex partners makes you 8.6 times more likely to get oral cancer.*

*60 percent of oropharyngeal cancer is HPV related.*

*90 percent of HPV+ oral cancers are HPV-16.*

*HPV can be transmitted from mother to child through saliva and skin-to-skin contact.*

I have recently implemented the FACT Protocol (Fluorescence Assessment and Cytology Test) into my yearly oral head and neck cancer screening. Being the first person to incorporate the FACT Protocol with the advanced technologies I encourage all people male and female, young and old to be screened at least yearly. The only way to help curb the rising cancer trend is to be proactive instead of reactive. Also maintain a healthy diet with plenty of fresh green vegetables and fruits, exercise regularly, refrain from tobacco products and excessive alcohol and see an oral health professional if you notice any abnormal growth or swelling in the oral environment.

-Dr. Steinberg

**Readers--How often do you go to the dentist? Would you ask for an oral cancer screening on your next visit? Leave us a comment below and let us know.**

*Dr. Steinberg is a dentist with a practice located in Austin, Texas. Dr. Steinberg has been a recognized leader and educator in the Oral – Systemic Wellness dental medicine area for over 30 years. He has taught at the prestigious Pankey Institute in Key Biscayne, Florida and has lectured to dentists, hygienists and assistants about developing a relationship based wellness practice. You can read more about Dr. Steinberg at [http://www.designerdentist.com/](http://www.designerdentist.com/).*

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