

Delta Dental encourages people to be aware, alert and proactive as research suggests HPV connection to oral cancer

Oral cancer is being diagnosed in growing numbers of people younger than 40 who do not use tobacco or drink alcohol excessively and researchers are concerned over a possible link with human papillomavirus (HPV).

An estimated 34,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral cancer this year. Annually, oral cancer causes an estimated 8,000 deaths. It is the sixth most common cancer worldwide and the third most common in developing nations.

Human papillomavirus infects a person's epidermis and mucous membranes. Recent research suggests the apparent demographic shift to younger patients may be attributed to HPV-16 and HPV-18 strains, which are sexually transmitted. It is estimated that approximately 70 percent of Americans – both men and women – will be infected with HPV at some point in their lives. Now, researchers at Johns Hopkins University have reported significant increases in HPV-related cases of oral cancer in people in their 40s. In addition, the American Cancer Society estimates there is an HPV connection to 39 percent of oral cancer patients.

“This potential link between HPV and oral cancer is startling and we are encouraging people to be aware of this possibility, be alert to early warning signs and be proactive in talking with their dentist,” said Dr. Jed Jacobson, chief science officer at Delta Dental of Illinois. “Because HPV is contracted sexually, some people are reluctant to talk about it. It is vital that dentists and the public know about oral cancer and understand the importance of oral cancer exams. The key is early detection because it can increase your chances of survival significantly.”

One issue Delta Dental is trying to address is an apparent public perception that oral cancer is rare or affects only smokers and drinkers or older adults. Statistics show, however, that there are no known risk factors found in 25 percent of oral cancer cases.

Fight Oral Cancer: Be Alert, Be Aware, Be Proactive

When oral cancer is found early, patients have an 80 to 90 percent survival rate. Late-stage diagnosis often occurs, however, because of an apparent lack of public awareness.

Signs and symptoms associated with oral cancer can include:

- Non-healing red or white spots that appear on the lips or anywhere inside the mouth and throat
- Tiny marks that resemble canker sores that last longer than two weeks
- A bulging lymph node on the neck
- The area behind the wisdom teeth no longer being symmetrical.
- Swelling of the tongue or throat

- A lump in the mouth or neck
- Numbness in the mouth region
- Vocal hoarseness that lasts for an extended time
- Sores that bleed and don't heal (in later stages)

Should a dentist find unexplained red or white spots during their oral cancer exam, there is an adjunctive diagnostic test covered by Delta Dental called the BrushTest™. The test is a quick and relatively painless way to sample and analyze potentially precancerous and cancerous cells. A sample is collected and mailed off to a laboratory for computer-assisted analysis. If the test shows abnormal cells, an oral surgeon can remove the cells and prevent cancer from developing. If the cells show early oral cancer, treatment often can stop the disease in its tracks.

More research is needed and an increasing amount of research is being conducted. As the research continues, Delta Dental is urging people to be aware, be alert and be proactive:

Be aware of HPV and its possible link with oral cancer.

Be alert to the warning signs and symptoms.

Be proactive by limiting your exposure to risk factors and encouraging your dentist to conduct a thorough oral cancer exam every time you visit.