

Benefits Spotlight

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What You Need to Know About Oral Cancer

Every hour, an average of one person in the United States dies of oral or pharyngeal cancer. Although the survival rates have increased since the 1960s, they are still relatively low, with only 60 percent of people diagnosed with the disease expected to live at least five years. “Oral cancer” refers to cancer occurring on the lips, mouth, tongue or throat. Cancer on the base of the tongue and throat area is becoming more common. This type of oral cancer is known as oropharyngeal cancer.

Whom it Affects

Oral cancer is twice as common in men as in women and African American men are at the highest risk. Although the cancer has traditionally been associated with people over 40, its diagnosis among young people has been on the rise — particularly in those who have human papillomavirus (HPV). In the past 20 years, the biggest increase in oral cancer has been due to HPV infections, especially among men. About 7 percent of U.S. adults have oral HPV.

Know Whether You’re at Risk

Alcohol consumption and tobacco use are two of the major risk factors for oral cancer. If you smoke and drink, your risk multiplies because alcohol increases the absorption of the toxic chemicals in tobacco. Sun exposure, a family history of cancer and a diet low in fruits and vegetables have also been linked to oral cancer. However, according to the American Dental Association, a quarter of people with oral cancer had no known risk factors prior to getting the disease.

Treatment Options

Early diagnosis provides the best outlook for oral cancer patients, so regular dentist visits are important. Several treatment options are available, depending on the size, location and extent of the disease:

- **Surgery** removes the cancerous tumors from the oral cavity and lymph nodes.
- **Radiation** uses high-energy radiation (like X-rays) to kill cancer cells, prevent disease from spreading and may also reduce a tumor before surgery.
- **Chemotherapy** uses chemicals to kill cancer cells and prevent the spread of the disease. Chemo may also be used along with radiation to increase effectiveness, or after surgery to destroy any cancer cells left behind.

How to Protect Yourself

Using a mirror, check your mouth at least once a month for any unusual patches, painful sores or lumps that won't heal, and report them to your dentist. Other symptoms include difficulty chewing, swallowing or moving your jaw. You can take a major step in lowering your risk by quitting smoking and limiting your alcohol intake. Smokers are six times more likely to develop oral cancer than nonsmokers, but smokers who quit cut that risk in half in just five years. Lowering the amount of daily alcohol intake will also lower your risk of oral cancer. Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and applying lip balm with sunscreen, before exposure to sun, may also be beneficial in lowering your risk.

A Day in the Life

From the time you wake up to the time you go to bed, you make dozens of decisions that affect your oral health. Join us for a day with a healthy mouth in mind.

6:00 A.M.

After a good night's sleep, wake up and enjoy a healthy breakfast of a banana, some almonds, a cup of yogurt and a mug of coffee. The banana, yogurt and almonds are great choices. The fruit provides fiber, which helps stimulate saliva flow, a natural defense against cavities. Yogurt is a great source of calcium, one of the best substances for keeping bones and teeth strong and healthy. Coffee can stain your teeth and dry out the mouth, but you can counteract them with a good morning oral care routine.

6:30 A.M.

To prevent coffee stains, get rid of bad breath and remove plaque and food debris, brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste after breakfast. An electric toothbrush with a timer feature ensures brushing for the recommended two minutes. You should spend 30 seconds on each quadrant of your mouth.

7:00 A.M.

Before heading out the door, quickly swish with fluoride mouth rinse. Not only does it help banish any last traces of coffee breath, the fluoride also protects teeth against cavities.

10:00 A.M.

When your stomach starts grumbling at work, avoid the doughnuts in the break room and reach for some fruit instead. Snacking smart and avoiding sugary treats are important in maintaining good oral health — and good overall health!

12:30 P.M.

During lunch, try to avoid garlic or sugary foods. Make sure to brush your teeth to avoid bad breath.

5:30 P.M.

Stress is linked to canker sores, cold sores and bruxism, also known as teeth grinding, and exercising after work can help you relax. To rehydrate, carry a bottle of water instead of a

sports drink. Sports drinks are not only full of sugar, their high acid content can also weaken tooth enamel, promoting decay.

7:30 P.M.

After dinner, indulging in a few cookies for dessert can be OK. It's better to indulge in sweets as part of a meal rather than snacking on cookies continuously throughout the evening. The saliva produced by chewing other food at dinner helps keep sugars from clinging to the teeth. Washing down the cookies with a glass of water helps rinse sugars away.

9:30 P.M.

Before your head hits the pillow for the night, stop by the bathroom to floss and brush with fluoride toothpaste. Make sure your mouth is clean before bed. It helps remove the day's plaque from teeth. Having a set bedtime routine also signals your body that it's time to wind down and go to sleep.