Problem Solvers 34 ORAL CANCER

Synonyms: Cancer, Tumor, Growth, Malignancy, Squamous Cell Carcinoma

Oral cancer is a cancerous tissue growth located in or around one's mouth. It is important to catch this type of cancer before it spreads to a distant site or neighboring site such as the nose. In the United States, oral cancer accounts for about 8% of all malignant growths. Men are affected twice as often as women especially men older than 40.

What is the most common type of oral cancer?

Squamous cell carcinoma accounts for up to 90% of oral cancers. They develop from tissues that line the mouth and lips. Squamous cell carcinomas have a much greater chance of spreading (or metastasizing) in comparison to basal cell carcinomas The lesion is often asymptomatic which makes oral cancer screenings imperative. It most commonly appears as a reddish skin plaque or ulcer that grows slowly.

Where can oral cancer appear in my mouth?

Oral or mouth cancer most commonly involves the tongue. It may also occur on the floor of the mouth, cheek lining, gums , the roof of one's mouth, or the lips. They may arise from many types of tissue in the mouth including salivary glands and lymph tissue.

What should I look for?

Keep your eye out for a skin lesion, lump, or ulcer that does not go away for around 2 weeks. This may be a small lesion on the tongue, lip, or other mouth areas. It is usually pale colored, but potentially could be dark or discolored. An early warning sign may be a white patch called a "leukoplakia" or a red patch known as an "erythroplakia" on the soft tissues of the mouth. These lesions are usually painless initially, however, it may develop a burning sensation or pain when the tumor is advanced. Other symptoms to look for are tongue problems, hard time swallowing, and mouth sores. Pain may be a late symptom but most often oral cancers are painless.

What may make me at greater risk for developing an oral cancer?

Some risk factors include tobacco, alcohol, the sun, Human papillomavirus, and those who have had a hematopoietic stem cell transplant. Use of chewing tobacco causes problems from direct contact with mucous membranes and should be avoided.

How can a dentist tell if a lesion is cancerous or not?

A dentist can identify a potentially cancerous lesion. However, a biopsy is the only way to know for sure. Benign and malignant lesions can look identical to the eye. A non-invasive brush biopsy can be performed to rule out the presence of cancerous cells. The only definitive method for determining if cancerous or precancerous cells are present is

through biopsy. The cells will then undergo microscopic evaluation to determine if they are indeed cancerous.

What will happen if a lesion in my mouth is determined to be cancerous?

Often times, all that is necessary is for a small sugical incision to be made to remove the lesion from the area in question. Radiation with or without chemotherapy can also be used in conjunction depending on the severity, stage, and size of the lesion.

Why is it so important for oral cancers to be detected early?

In 2011, around 37,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer. 66% of the time these will be found as late stage three and four disease. It will cause over 8,000 deaths. With routine oral cancer screenings, hopefully fewer than two thirds of these cancers will be left undetected until the disease is in its third or fourth stage. Because oral cancer can spread quickly, early detection is important. An oral cancer exam can identify early signs of this disease. The exam is quick and painless, and can be done during your regular dental check-up. Be sure to tell your dentist if you notice persistent changes in your mouth or throat, such as sores, swelling, or if you have difficulty eating or swallowing.

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