

A Trip to Your Dentist Could Save Your Life

Your DENTIST? Absolutely! You may think about cavities or cosmetic improvements to your smile when you go to the dentist, but dentists don't just focus on teeth. Think of them as physicians of the head and neck. One of our most important jobs is to notice changes in your mouth that could indicate oral cancer. And since oral cancer kills more Americans yearly than cervical cancer or skin cancer, about one person every hour, this is a very important thing to be looking for! Even those without teeth should see their dentist regularly for cancer screenings. And ladies, we all know it is you who make the decisions on healthcare for the family. Make sure your spouse gets in regularly!

Cancers of the head and neck can be devastating and often deadly. Undiagnosed oral cancers very commonly require removal of teeth, jawbone, tongue, or parts of the face. It is a terribly disfiguring disease and is fatal in 53% of cases within five years of detection. The reason this figure is so high is that many cancers in the mouth and throat are often not discovered until late in their development. Early detection and treatment gives a much higher rate of survival and is much more often curable.

Risk factors include tobacco use, particularly chew or "dip" tobaccos, high consumption of alcohol, excessive exposure to sunlight, dietary deficiencies, compromised immune systems, and genetic predisposition. Men have three times the likelihood of oral cancer than women, and blacks have a higher incidence than whites. Having more than one risk factor, especially using alcohol and tobacco together, increases the risk substantially.

Your dentist should routinely perform a cancer screening, most often at your regular checkup appointment. He will look all around your mouth, feeling your lips and cheeks, look at all sides of your tongue and the back of your throat, and may feel for lumps in the floor of your mouth, under the lower jaw, and on the sides of the neck. He might also take a special kind of x-ray that shows the bones of your jaw to look for cysts which could not be seen otherwise. Think of it as a mammogram for your mouth, but one that girls AND guys require. The oral exam should happen at every dental visit and the x-ray exam should be performed about once every three years. I find suspicious areas on several patients every year, right here in your own backyard, and most of the patients have no idea that anything is wrong until I show them on our camera system or x-ray.

You should also be aware of what to look for yourself. Pay attention to any red or white patches, sores that fail to heal or bleed, thickening of tissues, chronic sore throats or hoarseness, or difficulty chewing or swallowing. These are all signs of potential problems. If you notice such problems, see your health care provider immediately. And while self-examination is important, it is no substitution for a professional exam. You may miss something that could have devastating results.

Dr. Greg Grobmyer