

Oral Cancer Self-Examination

Thousands of Canadians are diagnosed every year with life-threatening oral cancer. On a positive note, when detected early, this disease has an estimated 80 per cent survival rate. Learning to recognize abnormal conditions in your mouth and performing routine self-examinations are important detection measures and could even save your life.

Dental hygienists have an important role in detecting early signs of oral cancer. They work with clients to raise their awareness about cancerous and pre-cancerous conditions, perform an examination of the entire mouth and screen for oral cancer at every appointment. (See Fact Sheet on "Oral Cancer Screening")

ABOUT ORAL CANCER

Most oral cancers begin in the cells on the surface of the tissue of the mouth. They are shallow but over time penetrate deeper into the tissue and potentially the bone. Generally, if caught early, they can be easily treated. Unfortunately, oral cancer is usually discovered in the later stages, which increases the risk for invasive treatment, serious side effects and even death.

Oral cancer may develop in any of the following areas:

- Lips
- Oral cavity (tongue, gums, inside the cheeks, under the tongue, roof of the mouth)
- Oropharynx (back of the mouth, throat and tonsils)

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The normal course of healing is **two weeks**. Anyone experiencing the following problems beyond this timeframe should consult a dental professional or seek medical attention:

- White or red patches anywhere in the mouth
- Mouth sore that bleeds easily and/or won't heal
- A colour change in the oral tissues
- Teeth that suddenly become loose
- Dentures that stop fitting
- Pain or difficulty swallowing/speaking
- Swelling or lumps
- Indurations (indented areas)
- Enlarged and/or hard lymph nodes or glands
- Persistent earache

CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

There is no single cause of oral cancer, but some factors increase the risk. However, even people without the usual risk factors could develop the disease, underlining the importance



of oral cancer screening (OCS). Some of the risk factors include:

- Tobacco use, including cigarettes, cigars, pipes and smokeless/chewing tobacco
- Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol
- An infection from certain types of human papilloma virus (HPV) – a risk that is increasing among younger adults
- A lack of fruit and vegetables
- Too much exposure to sunlight (ultraviolet rays), including tanning beds
- Age, however, while most oral cancers occur in people older than 45, an increasing number of adults under 40 are being diagnosed

ORAL CANCER DETECTION/PREVENTION

- Stop smoking and limit alcohol consumption.
- Use sunscreen protection for face, neck and lips.
- Maintain a well-balanced diet.
- See a dental hygienist for regular examinations.
- Know the risk factors and request routine cancer screening tests.
- Conduct ongoing self-examinations for oral cancer.

MONTHLY SELF-EXAMINATION ROUTINE

Supplies needed: flashlight, small mirror (optional), piece of gauze, wall mirror

It's important to learn to recognize the normal healthy condition of your own mouth so that you can detect abnormal conditions and report anything unusual to a dental professional or a medical specialist.

- Look at yourself in the mirror – both sides of your face and neck should look the same.

- Look at the skin on your neck and face for any changes in colour, moles that have changed, lumps or sores.
- Feel both sides of your neck gently with your fingertips.
- Gently place your finger over your “Adam’s Apple” and swallow. It should move up and down, not to the side. Report any hoarseness that doesn’t clear up within two weeks.
- Remove any dentures or appliances from your mouth.
- Check the inside of your mouth first by using a flashlight, then by putting the small mirror in your mouth, if you are able to do this.
- Check the roof of your mouth for changes in colour or lumps. With your index finger, gently press the roof of your mouth to feel for changes.
- Examine the floor of your mouth and feel it with your index finger. Remember, you are looking for colour changes, swelling and changes in shape.
- With a piece of gauze between your finger and thumb, pull out your tongue and examine all sides – feel your tongue with your fingers.
- Look at your gums for colour change, lumps, bumps or tenderness. Report any sores that have not healed after 14 days.
- Pull your upper lip up and then your lower lip down and check. Gently squeeze your lips as well as your cheeks with your index finger and thumb to feel for lumps, bumps or tenderness. Report any pain, loss of feeling or any areas that bleed without cause.
- Gently run your index finger over your upper and lower gums. If you find anything unusual or suspicious, report your findings to a dental or medical professional. Dental hygienists collaborate with physicians, dermatologists and oncologists on such matters.

Information and resources

In addition to oral cancer screening, dental hygienists will help you with your self-examination and can provide valuable information and educational materials on smoking cessation, nutrition, choosing the right sunscreen and skin protection.



As professional healthcare providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated healthcare professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.

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