

Oral Cancer: Striking Us Younger Than Ever Before

I had a friend in high school I will refer to here as JP. JP was diagnosed with oral cancer a few years after we graduated high school. Most of his affected jaw was removed to take out the cancer, and a metal plate replaced it. We lost touch after I moved away for college, but my understanding is after his life-changing surgery, JP was able to raise awareness about oral cancer and spoke with youth organizations and nonprofits to positively influence kids. Unfortunately, he passed away just a few years later, as the aggressive cancer returned. This is one reason annual oral cancer screenings are so important to me: it touched my circle of friends directly. We may have saved JP's life if we had had the technology we do now.

The ADA reports that each year one in ninety-two adults is diagnosed with some form of oral cancer. It commonly appears on the lips, gums, cheeks, tongue, the floor or roof of the mouth, and the throat. Oral cancer occurs when the cells making up your mouth and/or oral cavity mutate. These changes allow cancer cells to continue growing and dividing. The growing number of abnormal cells form an irregular growth. If the tumor or growth is removed quickly (during stage one or stage

two of cancer), the outcome is usually very good, with minimal surgery and a speedy recovery.

Oral cancer is an increasing threat to younger people. In 2010, actor Michael Douglas announced that he had oral cancer. He had had a sore throat for a long time and finally went to see a doctor about it. Other warning signs of oral cancer can include redness and irritation, red or white patches, pain, lumps in your mouth, difficulty chewing, and the way your teeth are aligned. Usually a spot that doesn't go away after two weeks needs to be examined and tested. After evaluation and testing, doctors determined Douglas had stage four squamous cell carcinoma oral cancer. He began both radiation and chemotherapy treatments. Despite being diagnosed with such late-stage cancer, he is now cancer-free. Regular checkups monitor his remission. Most people aren't so lucky when they are in stage four—the five-year survival rate is usually less than 50 percent, even after treatment.

The Mayo Clinic lists risk factors as tobacco, heavy alcohol use, and excessive time unprotected in the sun. However, these aren't the primary factors for a rising tide of oral cancer in our country. Until Douglas's very publicized diagnosis, oral cancer was considered a disease of the very old, usually among people who had smoked heavily their whole lives. However, as Douglas said in a 2016 public service announcement for the Oral Cancer Foundation, the fastest growing segment of Americans getting cancers of the mouth are younger people who aren't tobacco users. The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually transmitted virus that can also cause oral cancer. Technically, HPV can even be transferred via saliva. We are now screening for oral cancer at ages thirteen and up on an annual basis and twice a year for high-risk patients.

Prevention

The Mayo Clinic, ADA, and the surgeon general advise stopping use of all tobacco. Smoked or chewed, it exposes your mouth's cells to

cancer-causing chemicals. Frequent alcohol exposure also irritates the body's cells, leaving them vulnerable to cancer. I think the public as a whole is much better informed on this than we were even a few decades ago. Most of us understand tobacco is bad, regardless of the form. E-cigarettes and vaping are also hazardous and are showing to be just as harmful as tobacco in many ways.

Eating natural, unprocessed foods not only benefits your oral health but provides antioxidants and vitamins that help strengthen your body's defense systems and skin against cancer.

When you spend time in the sun, wear a wide-brimmed hat and apply lip balm that includes sunscreen. Many of us do these days, especially compared to when my grandparents were kids. Vitamin D is good for our skin, but after fifteen or so minutes of exposure to the sun, sunscreen should be worn. Most of us remember to wear sunblock when we are swimming or at the beach, but what about when we go to the park, run, or play golf?

People who spend a lot of time outdoors have been found to have an increased rate of skin cancer on their lower lips, due to the angle of the sun—men who are less likely to wear lip protection regularly are especially at risk. Many cosmetics contain UV protection, so people who wear makeup are often better protected than those who don't. Fishermen, golfers, bikers, and hikers, be prepared! My wife is a cosmetologist, so recently I asked her to find me an aftershave that contains SPF so I could kill two birds with one stone. My family spends a lot of time hiking, at the lake, or at Grandma's pool, so we keep sunblock and lip balm handy at all times.

How Your Dentist Can Help

Getting checked for oral cancer at the dentist? Yes, it's true. Regular six-month dental checkups include an oral cancer screening (at least

once a year in low- to moderate risk patients). If you go to the dentist regularly, your dentist can spot the cancer early. My hygienists and I perform a head and neck exam during each dental checkup. Once a year we use a painless light on our patients for a more in-depth screening. This involves inspecting common areas like the tongue, throat, face, and neck for swelling or abnormal discoloration. If I notice any sign of oral or pharyngeal cancer, we use a cytology test (similar to a pap smear) or remove part of the lesion and send it to an oral pathology lab for review. If it's serious enough, it would be referred to an oral surgeon or head and neck surgeon for surgery.

A few years ago, a friend of one of my hygienists had an abnormal area in the back of his throat that was discovered at his dental checkup during his head and neck exam. They didn't perform biopsies at that office, so he was told he should go see someone who did. He chose not to, because he didn't see the need at the time. He never smoked, drank, or participated in any other high-risk activities in his life. Well, six months later, at his next checkup, there is was, a big cancerous lesion. It almost took his life, and his quality of living was completely disrupted for months because half of his throat had to be removed to get all of the abnormal, cancerous cells out. HPV was identified as the cause. The last I heard, he was doing OK, but he will need to be closely monitored for years to come, and it's a great lesson for us all. You may be vulnerable, even if you don't think you are.