

TO YOUR HEALTH

A dental subject rarely discussed (but needs to be)

BY JOHN DENISON, DDS



A topic rarely, if ever, discussed in articles about the field of dentistry is oral cancer. Usually the dentist prefers to explain the virtues of straightening your teeth or brightening your smile, or we like to describe a new exciting instrument that can make your dental visits easier than ever. This article, however, will discuss a topic that we really should address.

Inasmuch as April is Oral Cancer Awareness Month, it seems appropriate to note that oral cancer has been in the news lately. This is primarily because of a famous patient, Michael Douglas, who has been publicly fighting throat cancer for two years with chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

The incidence of oral cancer has been increasing at a rate higher than any other form of cancer in the last few

years, and this is troubling because oral cancer has historically been associated with habits such as smoking or chewing tobacco, which nationally are declining. But in the past few years another cause of oral cancer has quickly taken the lead. HPV-16, (human papilloma virus version 16) is now becoming the dominant cause of oral cancer. HPV is spread through sexual contact, and some estimates say that 75 percent of sexually active adults have contracted and carry one form or other of the virus. Because of this, the fastest growing segment of oral cancer patients is young, healthy, nonsmoking individuals. In 2007, the number of cases jumped more than 11 percent in that single year alone!

Oral cancer is the largest group of those cancers that fall into the head and neck cancer category. Common names

include mouth cancer, tongue cancer, tonsil cancer and throat cancer. They include those cancers that occur in the mouth itself, in the very back of the mouth known as the oropharynx and on the exterior lip of the mouth.

When found at early stages of development, oral cancers have an 80 to 90 percent survival rate. Unfortunately at this time, the majority are found as late stage cancers, and this accounts for the very high death rate of about 45 percent at five years from diagnosis.

One of the problems associated with oral cancer is that in the early stages of its development, it is often painless, and the physical signs may not be obvious. Because of this the dental community is the first line of defense.

Everyone should have a regular dental examination that includes an oral cancer examination twice a year. In addition, patients should have a cancer screening test performed annually. This test is very simple and only takes a few minutes. After rinsing your mouth with a solution, the dentist looks inside your mouth, illuminating the tissue with a chemiluminescent light stick. Any questionable area can then be more thoroughly examined.

In addition to oral examinations by your dentist there is another line of defense available. HPV vaccines, which in the past have been given to young women because of the connection between the virus and cervical cancer, are now available for men as well. Talk with your family physician to learn more about this vaccine.

Just about every one of us at some point in our lives has either known someone with cancer or has struggled with it ourselves. There are very few things in life that create more anxiety than the thought of cancer. By including an oral cancer examination as part of your regular dental checkup, and by vaccinating against HPV, the threat of oral cancer can be greatly reduced. Through the process of early discovery, oral cancer can be identified and treated. ◀

Dr. John Denison is a practicing dentist in Oyster Point. For more information about this topic, visit his website at www.drdenison.com, or contact the American Cancer Society, the Oral Cancer Foundation or the American Dental Association. Dr. Denison can be reached at 757-873-9000.