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ORAL CANCER

FACT SHEET

Oral cancer can affect any area of the oral cavity including the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, tongue, and the hard or soft palate. The American Cancer Society predicts approximately 29,370 new cases of oral cancer will be diagnosed in 2005; incidence is twice as high in males than in females, and greatest in men over 50. And while deaths from oral cancer have decreased, an estimated 7,320 are expected to die from oral cancer this year.

The American Dental Association states that the best form of early detection is regular visits to the dentist. The ADA also reports that oral cancer kills more people nationwide than either cervical cancer or melanoma (skin cancer). Currently only half of all patients diagnosed with oral cancer survive more than five years. Statistics show that the incidence of oral cancer is increasing in women, young people and non-smokers – and that 25 percent of oral cancers occur in people with no known risk factors (see below). Early diagnosis – and knowing the risk factors can help improve survival rates for those diagnosed, and help prevent oral cancer from starting. Your dentist is the health professional who could most likely detect the first signs of oral cancer.

Common symptoms of oral cancer:

- a sore that bleeds easily or does not heal
- a color change of the oral tissues
- a lump, thickening, rough spot, crust or small eroded area
- changes in the voice
- white or red spot or sore anywhere in the mouth
- a change in the way the teeth fit together
- pain, tenderness, or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips

What is leukoplakia

Leukoplakia can be an early indicator of oral cancer, particularly in users of smokeless tobacco and those who smoke. It is a thick, white patch that forms on the cheeks, gums or tongue, and can become cancerous if left untreated or undiagnosed. Your dentist is trained to identify leukoplakia, and other precancerous or cancerous symptoms of the oral cavity.

Risk factors

- Smoking in combination with heavy alcohol consumption (more than 30 drinks a week) is the primary risk factor for oral cancer.
- Use of tobacco products.
- Age: oral cancer is more common in individuals over 40 years of age.
- Prolonged exposure of the sun, which can result in cancer of the lip.

According to an ADA news report, smokers are six times more likely than nonsmokers to develop oral cancers, and smokeless tobacco (snuff or chewing tobacco) is associated with cancers of the cheek, gums and lining of the lips and increases the risk by about 50 times. For additional information, visit the ADA website, at http://www.ada.org/public/topics/cancer_oral_faq.asp.