

# Oral Cancer – The Forgotten Disease

by **Scott F. Kenward, DMD**

More common than ovarian, cervical, stomach and brain cancer; oral cancer kills one person every hour of every day in America.

## **Are You At Risk?**

Though tobacco and excessive alcohol use are major predisposing risk factors, one in four oral cancer victims have no lifestyle risk factors whatsoever. As with most other cancers, age is the primary risk factor for oral cancer.

If you're sexually active, here's another reason to think about oral cancer. The human papilloma virus (HPV) is an extremely common sexually transmitted infection and especially prevalent in young adults. Few people even know they have it. HPV has long been known to cause cervical cancer and now studies suggest that it also plays a role in more than one in five oral cancer cases.

Virtually everyone is at risk for oral cancer, including you.

**Increased Risk:** Patients age 18 to 39 & sexually active patients (HPV).

**High Risk:** All patients age 40 and older & tobacco users younger than age 40.

**Highest Risk:** Patients age 40 and older with lifestyle risk factors (tobacco / excessive alcohol use) & patients with a history of oral cancer.

## **Detection and Treatment**

Fortunately, when found early, treatment of oral cancer is 90% successful. But late detection of oral cancer is the primary reason that both the incidence and death rates of oral cancer have continued to increase. To date, medical research has been unable to raise the survival rate of oral cancer much above 50%.

So, as with breast, prostate and cervical cancer, early detection is the key. The mammogram, the PSA test and the PAP smear have saved thousands of lives through early detection of disease. Early detection of oral cancer has been difficult, due to the inability of the eye to detect the subtle changes in the condition of the tissues of the mouth under normal clinic lighting.

Recently, modern dentistry has been able to overcome this limitation with the development of the ViziLite Plus exam.

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## **The ViziLite Plus Exam**

The ViziLite Plus exam improves the examiner's ability to identify, evaluate and monitor abnormal areas that are difficult to see under conventional lighting. Quick, easy and painless, the ViziLite Plus exam would be done once a year for all patients at increased risk, high risk and highest risk for oral cancer (adult patients age 18 and older and tobacco users of any age).

First, the patient rinses with a cleansing solution to prepare the mouth for examination. Then, your dental professional will examine your mouth using ViziLite, a specially designed light wand. This technology allows the examiner to see any potentially cancerous or pre-cancerous tissues that may have otherwise gone undetected under conventional lighting. If a suspicious lesion is detected, it will be marked with T-Blue, a blue dye, and documented for further testing.

The fee for the ViziLite Plus exam is quite reasonable and generally less than the cost of a PAP smear. Dental insurance might not cover this advanced oral cancer screening as an addition to the standard visual examination. Your dental office can likely provide you with a medical insurance form for you to use to file this procedure with your medical insurance.

Take advantage of this breakthrough in oral cancer detection technology. Early detection of pre-cancerous tissue can minimize or eliminate the potentially disfiguring effects of oral cancer and possibly save your life.

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