



Benefits Bridge

by UNITED CONCORDIA DENTAL

MANAGING WELLNESS

HOW TO BE PROACTIVE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ORAL CANCER

- The Oral Cancer Foundation has designated April as Oral Cancer Awareness Month
- Almost 50,000 people in the U.S. will be diagnosed with oral cancer in 2017
- Avoiding high-risk behaviors and getting regular screenings is key to surviving oral cancer



Posted by [DONNA PLEIS](#) April 2, 2018

Almost 50,000 people in the U.S. will be diagnosed with [oral cancer in 2017](#), according to the Oral Cancer Foundation (OCF). This disease is largely preventable, and when detected early, the survival rate for oral cancer is 80 to 90 percent. But unfortunately, due to lack of public awareness and screening opportunities, many cancers of the mouth and throat are not diagnosed until later stages—accounting for a death rate of 43 percent within five years of diagnosis.

These alarming statistics are why it's important to educate your employees on high-risk behaviors linked to [oral cancer](#) and the importance of periodic oral cancer screenings.

Who's at Risk?

The National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research reports that men, [over the age of 40](#), have a risk of developing oral cancer that is twice that of women, and [African-American men](#) are one of the groups with the highest risk. However, one of the most [oral cancer risk factors](#) is lifestyle.

Tobacco use is most often linked to oral cancer—cigarettes, cigars, pipes, chewing tobacco. In fact, the OCF says that [90 percent of people](#) who are diagnosed with oral cancer are tobacco users. And a person who chews tobacco is 50 times more likely to develop cancer of the mouth.

But the other big risk factor for oral cancer is alcohol use, especially in conjunction with using tobacco products. People who smoke and drink have a 15 times greater chance of acquiring oral cancer than those who don't smoke or drink.

Another condition that has recently been associated with a subset of oral cancers is the sexually transmitted [human papillomavirus](#) (HPV type 16). According to the American Dental Association, these cancers develop in the throat or at the base of the tongue, near the tonsils. And while they are often detected later than non-HPV oral cancers, the risk of dying or recurrence is less.

Cancer of the lip is often the result of sun exposure, and diets low in fruits and vegetables are also thought to have a connection to oral cancer.

Warning Signs

It's important for all of your employees to recognize the [signs of oral cancer](#), but it's particularly significant if they smoke or chew tobacco. When an employee has any of the following symptoms persist for more than two weeks, they should call their doctor or dentist immediately.

- A lump, thickening or sore anywhere in their mouth, lip or throat area
- A red or white patch anywhere in their mouth
- Trouble moving their tongue or jaw or a feeling of numbness anywhere in the mouth
- Problems swallowing or chewing

- Feeling as though something is caught in their throat
- Pain in one ear, but no hearing loss
- Dentures or partials are no longer comfortable or fit properly

Oral Cancer Screenings

Because oral cancer can be treated successfully when caught early, the importance of [early detection of oral cancer](#) cannot be emphasized enough; they really are key to survival. The good news is dentists and hygienists do these simple, painless screenings whenever their patients come in for checkup appointments. So if your employees go to the dentist every six months, their dentist will screen for early signs of oral cancer every six months—one more reason everyone should visit their dentist regularly. A thorough [screening procedure](#) takes less than five minutes and involves the dentist assessing the patient's head, face and lips, as well as palpating the neck area. All areas of soft tissue inside the mouth and back of the throat are examined for any changes or unusual thickenings. And the dentist will also carefully inspect both the top and bottom surfaces of the tongue.

As an employer, now's the time to spread the word about oral cancer. Share this [oral cancer infographic](#) to educate about the disease and its risk factors, symptoms, as well as the importance of early detection. Encourage all employees to call their dentists and schedule what could be a life-saving oral cancer exam, and check with your local dental society for information on free screening sites within your community. And because oral cancer is a cancer of lifestyle choices, smoking cessation programs may be another helpful option for many of your employees to not only prevent oral cancer but to maintain a healthier way of life.

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