

Are you at Risk for Oral Cancer?



According to a recent study by the independent nonprofit, FAIR Health, rates of oral cancer have

increased dramatically in recent years. The analysis shows that health insurance claims have skyrocketed 61 percent from 2011 to 2015, with the greatest increases in throat and tongue cancers.

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is the most common malignancy in the oral cavity (OC) and oropharynx (OP) regions, accounting for 90% of head and neck cancers. The major risk factors for both OC-SCC and OP-SCC are tobacco use, including cigarettes, cigars, pipes, and smokeless tobacco, alcohol use, and the human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. Those who practice tobacco use in conjunction with alcohol have a substantially higher risk of oral cancer than using one without the other.

But while tobacco use has fallen in younger age groups, oral cancers remain on the increase. Recent studies link this dramatic rise to the human papillomavirus (HPV). Oral HPV, a subset of oral cancers, is not only much more common in men than women, it's also much more aggressive, though researchers aren't sure why. Early diagnosis is critical for successful treatment.

According to the American Dental Association, symptoms of oral cancer may include:

- a lump or thickening in the oral soft tissues
- soreness or a feeling that something is caught in the throat
- difficulty chewing or swallowing
- ear pain
- difficulty moving the jaw or tongue
- hoarseness

- numbness of the tongue or other areas of the mouth
- swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly

If any of the above symptoms lasts for two weeks, see your dentist immediately. Dental practitioners should be especially vigilant in checking for signs of oral cancers for those who use tobacco or excessive amounts of alcohol and for those over 40 years of age, who are at a higher risk. During a screening, your dentist will closely examine the lips, gums, tongue, the roof and floor of the mouth, and throat for signs of white or red lesions. Lifestyle choices plays a critical factor in oral cancers, and limiting tobacco and alcohol use will help significantly reduce your risk.