ORAL FITNESS FACT SHEET

Lip Cancer

Sunlight, wind, drying outdoor occupations, and tobacco use are all risk factors for lip cancer.

Do you spend long periods of time outdoors, either through your job or in your leisure time, exposed to sunlight, cold, or wind? If so, do you:

- Use lip balm with a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of 15 or 30?
- Wear a hat to provide shade to your face?
- Seek shade to avoid direct sunlight exposure when possible?

If you answered "yes" to the questions above, then you are practicing sun-smart behavior and protecting yourself against lip cancer. If you answered no, now's the time to start practicing sun-smart behavior and protect yourself.

Are you at risk for lip cancer?

Studies show that smoking pipes or cigars is more likely to cause lip cancer than cigarette smoking because the heat and damage from the pipe stem and chemicals in the tobacco harm the lips. The risk for lip cancer is also higher in older, fair-skinned males than in females, younger people, or dark-skinned people.

Why?

Men practice fewer sun protective behaviors and use lip balm less often than women. A recent study showed that women who used lipstick with a sunscreen frequently had one-seventh of the risk of men. The lower rate of lip cancer in dark-skinned individuals is due to the high levels of melanin, a pigment in the skin cells that helps protect the skin against burning.

How can you tell if you have lip cancer?

Lip cancer appears as a continual, non-healing ulcer or wart-like growth. Sometimes, it looks like an abnormal redness or thickening of the lip. When felt between the thumb and forefinger, lip cancers often feel hard and swollen. 9 out of 10 lip cancers are found on the lower lip.

The overall survival rate for lip cancer is very high (90%) if detected early and treated. If you suspect that you have lip cancer, see your dentist or physician as soon as possible for a professional evaluation.