ORAL FITNESS FACT SHEET

Oral Cancer

What is oral cancer? It is cancer of any area of the mouth – gums, cheek, tongue, inside the throat, or lips. Oral cancers are found on the tongue, the bottom or roof of the mouth, in the tonsils, on the salivary glands, and in the back of the throat. They can affect your speaking and eating ability, and can permanently disfigure your face. About half of all oral cancer patients die within 5 years, even with treatment.

Most oral cancers occur in people over 40 years of age, but begin to develop when a person is younger. The bad news is that oral cancer is striking people at a younger age, and more women are developing oral cancer.

75% of oral cancers are caused by either alcohol or tobacco. In fact, oral cancers are six times more common in alcohol drinkers, and 2-18 times more common in smokers. Smoking marijuana may also cause oral cancer. Smokeless tobacco (moist snuff, dip, or chewing tobacco) increases the risk of cancer of the cheek, inner lip, or gums.

Other potential causes of oral cancer are vitamin and mineral deficiencies (especially iron) and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Human papilloma virus (genital warts) is one type of STD that is commonly associated with oral cancer.

You can protect yourself from oral cancer using three lines of defense: 1) increase your knowledge, 2) reduce your risk, and 3) get regular dental check-ups that include an oral cancer examination.

1. Learn the warning signs and symptoms of oral cancer:
   - A swelling, lump, or growth that does not heal.
   - White or red patches inside the mouth that don't go away.
   - Loose teeth for no apparent reason.
   - Pain or difficulty when swallowing.
   - Pain or difficulty when opening your mouth.
   - Persistent sore throat.
   - A nagging cough or persistent hoarseness.
   - Unusual bleeding in your nose or mouth.
   - Numbness or tingling in your lips or tongue.
2. Reduce your risk of oral cancer.
   - Cut down or eliminate alcohol and tobacco use.
   - If you practice oral sex, protect yourself from STDs by using a barrier method.
   - Eat a diet high in fruits and vegetables that contain vitamins A, C, E, and iron which protect the mouth.
3. See your dentist regularly and make sure you receive an oral cancer examination.