



live well, work well

Health and wellness tips for your work, home, and life—brought to you by the insurance and healthcare specialists at Bouchard Insurance.

Oral Cancer

Oral cancer affects over 35,000 Americans every year, claiming over 8,000 lives.

About the Disease

Oral cancer can develop in any part of the oral cavity, but usually begins in the tongue or the floor of the mouth. It is one of a group of cancers referred to as head and neck cancer. When oral cancer spreads (metastasizes), it usually travels through the lymphatic system. Cancer cells then often appear in nearby lymph nodes in the neck.

Risk Factors

While anyone can develop oral cancer, the risk is highest in those who frequently use tobacco and/or alcohol. It is also more prominent in males, those over age 40, and those with a family history of head or neck cancer.

Symptoms

- White or red patches in the mouth
- A mouth sore that will not heal
- Bleeding in the mouth
- Loose teeth
- Problems or pain with swallowing
- A lump in the neck
- An earache

Diagnosis

The average age of oral cancer diagnosis is 60, when it is inevitably in its late stages. Therefore, if you have any of the symptoms described above, it is important to have a doctor or dentist check your mouth and throat for problems. If the exam shows an abnormal area, a small sample of tissue may be removed for further analysis. This is called a biopsy – the only way to know for sure if the irregular area is cancerous.

Treatment

The choice of treatment mainly depends on general health, the location and size of the tumor, and whether the cancer has spread. Treatment may include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or a combination of the three. Some patients will need to have plastic or reconstructive surgery to rebuild the bones or tissues of the mouth, and some may need dental implants or dental prostheses.

If oral cancer or its treatment leads to problems with talking, speech therapy will begin.

Prevention

Quitting tobacco use is one of the most important steps in preventing oral cancer. There are also some studies that suggest eating the daily recommended amount (or more) of fruits and vegetables may stave off oral cancer. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) suggests 2-3 cups of fruits and vegetables per day for children; 4-5 cups a day for teenagers; and 5-6 cups a day for adults.

Source: National Cancer Institute, www.cancer.gov



Did You Know...?

Oral cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body. If oral cancer spreads to the lungs, it is still considered oral cancer – not lung cancer. Doctors sometimes call the new tumor “distant” or metastatic disease.