Oral Cancer is on the Rise:
The Importance of Early Detection

April is Oral Cancer Awareness month and Masters Dental Group would like to invite you to join us in spreading oral cancer awareness! It’s a cancer you’ve probably never even thought about. However, it kills twice as many women as cervical cancer does each year. Oral cancer kills as many people as melanoma does and is now more common than leukemia. Approximately 43,000 people in the U.S. will be newly diagnosed with oral cancer this year. The rate of oral cancer is rapidly rising among young people, women and non-smokers. Early detection of oral cancer is vital. Here's how you to know whether you’re at risk, plus what you can do to protect your health.

Risk Factors?

- **Tobacco use:** About 80% of people with oral cavity and oropharyngeal cancers use tobacco in the form of cigarettes, chewing tobacco or snuff. The risk of developing oral cancer depends on the duration and frequency of tobacco use. Smoking can lead to cancer in the mouth or throat, and oral tobacco products are associated with cancer in the cheeks, gums, and inner surface of the lips.
- **Alcohol:** About 70% of people diagnosed with oral cancer are heavy drinkers. This risk is higher for people who use both alcohol and tobacco. For people who smoke and drink heavily, the risk of oral cancer may be as high as 100% more than the risk for people who do not smoke or drink.

Even non-smokers are at risk of oral cancer

It may be hard to believe you need to be checked regularly by your dentist. It used to be that people with a history of alcohol or tobacco use, particularly those who used the substances together, were the main population at risk for oral cancer. However, over the last 30 years, that's changed. More people are getting oral cancer that would not be considered classically at risk. This may be related to the human papilloma virus, HPV can cause normal cells in infected skin to turn abnormal. Most of the time, you cannot see or feel these cell changes. In most cases, the body fights off the HPV infection naturally and infected cells then go back to normal. But in cases when the body does not fight off this virus, HPV can cause visible changes and certain types of HPV can cause an oropharyngeal cancer. Cancer caused by HPV often takes years to develop after initially getting an HPV infection.
Oral cancer self-exam

Conduct a self exam at least once a month. It only takes a few minutes of your time, but could make a big difference in your life. Take a look in the mirror at the inside of your mouth, using a bright light or flashlight or buy a mouth mirror (available at most pharmacies) for those hard-to-see areas. Be sure to check the back and sides of your tongue. If you see or feel anything suspicious - lumps, bumps, tender areas, white, red or grey patches, schedule an appointment to have it checked. Any of these symptoms that last more than two to three weeks should be biopsied.

Oral cancer biopsy: What you need to know

After the physical examination of your mouth, if your doctor finds any areas that are suspicious, he may recommend a biopsy. This is simply taking a small portion of the suspicious tissue (called an incisional biopsy) or a surgeon could remove the entire tumor (called an excisional biopsy) for examination under a microscope. The sample of tissue is then sent to a pathologist who examines the tissue under a microscope to check for abnormal or malignant cells. If a diagnosis of cancer is made, surgery, as well as treatment such as chemotherapy or radiation may be necessary. Our team will work closely with your oncologist and other members of your medical team to ensure that you achieve the best possible oral health care both during and after treatment.

Early detection key to successful treatment
If you have regular screenings once or twice a year and catch a lesion early, the prognosis is very good. Oral cancer is one of the most curable diseases. But once a lesion is greater than 4 millimeters thick, the likelihood that it has spread to the lymph nodes is great. Lymph node involvement in oral cancers decreases the success rate of treatment to 50 to 60 percent. If the cancer spreads outside to the neck, the success rate drops to 30 percent. Removal of parts of the neck, jaw, lip or tongue may be necessary if the cancer progresses.

**Strategies to prevent oral cancer**

**What are the best ways to avoid oral cancer?**

- **Always brush and floss your teeth regularly.** An unhealthy mouth reduces your immune system and inhibits your body's ability to fight off potential cancers.
- **Do not smoke (or chew) any type of tobacco product.** If you are a smoker, even with a casual habit, make the decision to stop.
- **Drink alcohol in moderation (one to two drinks per day) and never binge drink.** The risk of developing oral cancer increases with the amount and length of time alcohol are consumed.
- **Limit your exposure to the sun.** We all know we need to use sunscreen, but do we remember to apply it to our lips? Always use UV-A/B-blocking sun protection on your lips when you are in the sun. Repeated exposure increases the risk of cancer on the lips, especially the lower lip.
- **Exercise regularly.** An active lifestyle is known to boost the immune system and help ward off cancer.
- **Choose cancer-fighting foods in your diet.** The American Institute for Cancer Research recommends you eat lots of beans, berries, cruciferous vegetables (like cabbage and broccoli), dark green leafy vegetables, flaxseed, garlic, grapes, green tea, soy and tomatoes for their role in cancer prevention. How you prepare those foods is also important in the prevention of cancer. Replace frying and grilling with baking, boiling or steaming. Use healthy spices like garlic, ginger and curry powder for added flavor.
- **See your dentist or dental hygienist regularly** (at least every six months) and ask for an oral cancer screening to be done.
- **Conduct a self exam at least once a month.** It only takes a few minutes of your time, but could make a big difference in your life. Be sure to check the back and sides of your tongue. If you see or feel anything suspicious — lumps, bumps, tender areas, white, red or grey patches, see your dentist to have it checked.

Finding out you have oral cancer can be devastating news. If you are concerned that you might be at risk for developing oral cancer, talk to us about screenings and other things you can do to reduce your risk. Through a routine visual inspection, our team at Masters Dental Group can often detect premalignant abnormalities and cancer at an early stage when treatment is both less expensive and more successful, and can potentially save your life. Ask us about a screening during your next visit!