

# Dentists play key role in early detection of oral cancers

In 2009, the BC Cancer Agency documented more than 500 new cases of oral cancer. It is estimated that over 80 percent of these cases could be detected by a dentist.<sup>1</sup>

Healthy behaviours and early detection are key factors to reducing cancer incidence and improving outcomes. Dentists have an important role to play in the early detection of oral cancers as dentists tend to see patients on a regular basis when they are well, rather than when they are sick. As a result, dentists can help detect suspicious lesions in the mouth before the patient has any symptoms.

The BC Cancer Agency has developed Oral Cancer Screening Guidelines for adult dental patients in BC over the age of forty. All the elements for screening and monitoring outlined in the guidelines may not be included in every examination by your dentist, but will be considered along with your medical history, age and health behaviours.

During your dental exam, your dentist will inspect all the soft tissues in your mouth including your gums, lips, cheeks, tongue, floor of your mouth and the roof of your mouth. Your dentist will also feel along your jaw, and other areas of your head and neck for

## Signs and symptoms of oral cancer:

Other health conditions can have the same signs and symptoms as oral cancer, so having any of the following symptoms does not necessarily mean a person has cancer. However, it is important to see a doctor about:

- an ulcer or sore in the mouth that doesn't heal
- a lump in the lip, mouth, gums, tongue or roof of mouth
- thickening in the cheek
- bleeding in the mouth
- pain in the mouth that doesn't go away
- loose teeth
- dentures that no longer fit
- slurred speech
- swollen saliva glands
- swollen lymph nodes in the neck

White patches (leukoplakia) or red patches (erythroplakia) on the lips or in the mouth may be precancerous conditions that may become cancerous.

Source: Canadian Cancer Society website

any unusual tenderness, lumps or swelling.

Your dentist *may* also use some optional screening tools that use a special light, dyes or scrapings to have a more detailed examination of certain areas of your mouth.

These are not a required part of your dental exam, but may be used by your dentist based on your health history and lifestyle factors, or if he or she needs to examine a particular area of your mouth more closely.

In some dental offices, the hygienist may also use these tools, but the dentist needs to evaluate the findings to determine your diagnosis.

If your dentist identifies a suspicious lesion in your mouth or a lump that is not going away, he or she may recommend that you have a biopsy. Your dentist may do the biopsy or may refer you to another dental or medical professional to have this done. The

decision about any required treatment is most often based on the biopsy result.

While the incidence of oral cancers in Canada may be low relative to breast and prostate cancers, the effects of oral cancers on patient quality of life can be devastating. There is no single cause of oral cancer. It results from a variety of factors and how individual patients react to those factors.

Seventy-five percent of oral cancers can be attributed to exposure to tobacco or alcohol.<sup>2</sup> In particular, patients who chew tobacco, betel quid/areca nut/panan; drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes (especially together) or are exposed to second-hand smoke; smoke marijuana; have a diet low in fruits and vegetables; have had an HPV (human papilloma virus) infection (type 16); or have chronic gum disease<sup>3</sup> can increase

their risk of getting an oral cancer by four to ten times.

Maintaining good daily oral hygiene, having your teeth cleaned professionally on a regular basis, and adopting healthy behaviours is good for your body, and your mouth. Have a dental examination by a dentist at least once per year and report any lingering sores or tenderness in your mouth or surrounding areas to your dentist or physician as soon as possible.

Your dentist is your 'doctor of the mouth', and an integral part of your preventive health care team.

If you have any questions about your personal risk for oral cancer, speak to your dentist or physician. For more information visit [bccancer.bc.ca](http://bccancer.bc.ca) or [yourdentalhealth.ca](http://yourdentalhealth.ca).

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Cancer Statistics 2007

<sup>2</sup> Epidemiology and Prevention of Oral Cancer, Oral Oncology 1997

<sup>3</sup> BC Cancer Agency website