

Someone dies in the U.S. of oral cancer every hour of everyday. In 2014, 43,250 people will be diagnosed with tongue or throat cancer. The lower lip is the most common site for skin cancer. Because 66% of these people will go undiagnosed, only 57% of them will live for 5 years.

Oral cancers kill more people than melanomas, lymphomas, thyroid, and cervical cancer. Early indicators of oral cancer include red or white discolorations, sores that don't heal within 14 days, and hoarseness which lasts for a prolonged period.

Twenty years ago, oral cancer was most likely to occur in men over 50 (10 men to 1 woman). This type of cancer is related to tobacco and alcohol use. Because of increase tobacco use in women, the ratio is now 2 men to 1 woman.

The fastest growing segment of the oral cancer population is now people aged 25-50. This is related to a serious increase in cancer caused by the Human Papillomavirus (HPV-16), the same virus that caused warts and cervical cancer in woman. HPV related oral cancer can be sexually transmitted. You might recall the actor Michael Douglas was treated for this type of cancer.

Because the ratio of HPV cancer is 3 men to 1 woman, in the near future, more men will die of HPV -16 related oral cancers than women with cervical cancer.

While these are grim statistics, there is some good news. The progress of cancer is rated in stages 1 – 4. If oral cancer is detected in stages 1 and 2, the survival rate is 80-90%. If detected in stages 3 or 4, the survival rate drops to 20% to 30%. More good news is that screening for oral cancer requires no special equipment, pain, high cost, or invasive procedures. Any dentist or hygienist with the proper training can perform an oral cancer test during a routine office visit.

Preventive measures to decrease your chances of oral cancer would include using a hat and sunscreen to decrease lower lip exposure to the sun and cessation of tobacco and heavy alcohol use.

There is an HPV virus vaccine currently administered to young women to prevent cervical cancer. There is some discussion in the medical community about using it to prevent HPV oral cancers in the male population. You should discuss this with your physician if you have teenage sons.

Lastly and most importantly, you should see your dentist regularly and insist on an oral cancer screening at every appointment.

In observance of Oral Cancer Awareness Month, Dr. William Zoerhof will be offering FREE oral cancer screenings on Saturday, April 26th from 9 to 1 pm at his office located at 8478 M-119, Suite 20 in Harbor Springs (near the Harbor Springs airport).