

Your Dental Health

The contents of this series of "Dental Health Talks" was originally prepared by the American Dental Association. They are made available for Tundra Times through the Public Health Education Office of the Alaska Native Health Service.

It is well known that our dental health program in Interior Alaska has not yet reached everyone needing dental services. This is especially true about the people in the rural communities. However, everyone understands how important it is to take care of our teeth which is a part of our total well-being.

No. 21 — Preventing and Treating Oral Cancer

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Women are catching up with men in one respect that won't arouse much celebration among the feminists.

Researchers have learned that as women smoke more they also are getting more cancer of the mouth. The cigarette habits of women are blamed for the sudden and alarming increase of mouth cancer among women.

Within the past few years, dentists across the country have saved the lives of many people. They did this by detecting cancer in the mouths of their patients, men and women early enough so that the cancers could be successfully treated.

The American Dental Association has asked all dentists to maintain a constant vigil for oral cancers, and they are in a unique position to spot them early.

At one time or other your dentist may have mentioned a suspicious looking area developing inside your mouth. Investigation of these areas is routine, and usually they amount to nothing more serious than an irritated patch of tissue.

But to be sure, he can take a sample of the suspicious tissue called a biopsy and send it to a pathologist for microscopic examination. Most of these specimens turn out to be normal.

More than 8,000 Americans die annually from oral cancers. Most could have been saved if they had heeded the early signs of this disease. About 15,000 new cases are diagnosed each year.

The use of tobacco in any form appears to be a major cause of oral cancer. Smokers have a 400 per cent higher risk of dying from oral cancers than nonsmokers.

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The most frequent sites of oral malignancies are the lips (27 per cent) and the tongue (22 per cent). Other common sites are the inside of the cheeks, salivary glands, palate, gum tissues and under the tongue on the floor of the mouth.

One of the earliest signs of oral cancer can be a white or yellow-white patch that feels leathery to the touch. Dentists call this leukoplakia, and it usually means that something is irritating the tissue. It could be such factors as the use of tobacco or ill-fitting dentures.

Other signs include any lump in the soft tissue of the mouth, sores that don't heal, difficulty in swallowing, red spots and hoarseness.

These are the signs a patient, himself, can see and should be aware of and be suspicious of between dental examinations.

If the pathology examination of the biopsy oral tissue shows that it is not cancerous but that it might become so, then the cause of the irritation must be immediately eliminated. You will need the assistance of the dentist in determining what the cause might be. If it is an ill-fitting denture, it should be corrected. If it is due to smoking, the habit should be stopped.

A word to the wise has proved not to be sufficient enough when it comes to the relationship between smoking and oral cancer. The diagnosis of 15,000 new cases of oral cancer in the nation each year, about half of which are fatal, testifies to widespread disregard for prevention of this serious disease.

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(Next article: It Begins Before Birth)