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smoking, alcohol, and oral cancer

If you smoke—and especially if you smoke and drink alcohol—your chances of spawning a cancer in your mouth or throat are about 15 times greater than for a non-drinking non-smoker.

“Tobacco use has long ranked as the number one risk factor for oral cancer—cancer of the mouth, tongue, and throat,” says Dr. Kevin Neshat, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon at the Dental Implant Center of North Carolina.

“Alcohol increases the risk of developing oral cancer by a major factor. Researchers believe that the dehydrating effect of alcohol on cell walls enhances the ability of tobacco carcinogens to permeate mouth tissues. Whatever that reaction may be, the effects are devastating. There are 30,000 new cases of oral cancer in this country each year, and 300,000 new cases worldwide. A person dies from oral cancer every hour of every day.”

Often oral cancers are asymptomatic for long periods, so Dr. Neshat urges his patients to do a self-exam of the mouth every month “just as women are encouraged to self-examine their breasts every month. And high-risk patients—smokers,

consumers of alcohol, and users of smokeless tobacco—should see their dentist or an oral and maxillofacial surgeon for an oral cancer check every year.

“I advise my patients to use a bright light and perhaps a small mirror to look for reddish patches, called erythroplasia; whitish patches, called leukoplakia; a sore that fails to heal and bleeds easily; or a lump or thickening of the tissues. A chronic sore throat or hoarseness and difficulty in chewing or swallowing can also signal the need for a check-up.

“As they conduct this exam, patients should look and feel inside of their lips and the front of their gums, and tilt their head back to look at and feel the roof of their mouth. Pull out the cheek to see the inside and also to see the back gums, and extend the tongue to look at all surfaces. Finally, it’s important to feel for lumps or enlarged lymph nodes in both sides of the neck and under the lower jaw.”

Dr. Neshat routinely conducts such an exam with every patient who slips into his dental chair. “What we know about oral cancers is that there is a high rate of success when the cancer is detected in a very early stage—and unfortunately, most oral cancers are detected in a more advanced stage, largely because many are symptom-free for fairly long periods before they demand attention.”

CANCER AND IMPLANTS

Dr. Neshat recalls the case of a patient in her mid-60s who one day felt a lump on the side of her face. “It was pain-free, so many months went by before she had it checked out. The diagnosis was of a malignant parotid gland tumor. The parotid glands secrete saliva. They are located below and in front of the ears.

“This patient was a pack-a-day smoker when she got this diagnosis, and she was

Dr. Neshat recommends a baseline panoramic X-ray for all patients, to reveal problems such as growths, lesions, and tumors in the jawbone—often free of symptoms.



a non-smoker the day after. It was necessary to remove the entire parotid gland, and the cancer was attacked with intense radiation therapy.

“Many of the good cells that are overwhelmed by radiation are bone cells, blood vessel cells, and salivary cells. Thus, patients are told of the high risk of leaving teeth in the mouth of even questionable prognosis—teeth with some bone loss—because radiation cuts off or sharply reduces blood supply to the bone.”

For these types of radiation cases, Dr. Neshat explains, “all the teeth, upper and lower, are often removed prophylactically, leaving patients with limited ability to chew. The belief is that dentures will serve the chewing function, but over time, dentures create their own set of problems. When there are no teeth that need to be held in place, the jawbone steadily recedes or resorbs, responding to a cell-level message that it is no longer needed. Dentures become looser and looser, and constantly need re-fitting.”

This patient came to Dr. Neshat for different and far more stable treatment. “Following radiation, it was probably true both of her jaws had sufficient bone to support dentures,” Dr. Neshat explains. “But she wisely had four implants on her lower jaw that provided a firm, stable base for her dentures and continue to do so to this day. Later, we will add implants to her upper jaw to provide the same stability, so that she will be able to chew and function in normal fashion.”

RADIATION THERAPY

“Today, we have much better options for patients who must undergo radiation therapy to fight oral cancer,” Dr. Neshat notes. “We have, with better knowledge, equipment, technology, and experience, come to understand that it is actually only necessary to extract certain teeth,

followed by daily fluoride treatments, rather than removing all teeth. Most of the time we can place implants in radiated jaws if the amount of radiation is within limits—below 6,000 RADS.

“But even in cases where radiation exceeds those levels, we are using hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBO) with great success. HBO—the same treatment used with divers to prevent the bends—is a useful therapy for soft tissue injury caused by radiation, as well as for restoring tissues and cells damaged by chemotherapy and radiation treatments. It is of great value in the treatment of osteoradionecrosis. Using HBO, we are successfully placing implants in patients who have radiation treatment levels in excess of the 6,000 RAD intensity level.

“With dental implants, we have a four-month window for treating radiation patients, from the time radiation starts to the point when it significantly begins affecting the bone. So if we can extract necessary teeth—those showing some indication of bone loss—and place implants within that four-month timeframe, the patient will be in great shape—and the radiation intensity level is not an issue in terms of dental health.”



Small titanium implants take the place of the natural root of the tooth, and actually bond or integrate with a patient’s bone. They are, Dr. Neshat points out, “the Gold Standard when it comes to replacing missing teeth.”

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