



Mouth cancer: how can **you** help?

With **Mouth Cancer Action Month** on the horizon, the focus begins to draw on a disease that kills more people than testicular and cervical cancer combined.

Taking place throughout November, the British Dental Health Foundation, supported by Denplan, will be calling on the entire profession to educate members of the general public about a disease that continues to grow, under the tagline 'If In Doubt, Get Checked Out'.

Latest figures show that over 6,000¹ new cases of mouth cancer a year are diagnosed in the UK, and one person dies every five hours from the disease. As a result, action must be taken to raise awareness and change these figures.

Smoking is still the main cause of mouth cancer, and with two thirds of smokers wanting to give up, Mouth Cancer Action Month is the perfect opportunity for health professionals to encourage smokers to do so. The dental team has a role to play in smoking cessation either by brief intervention in the practice or by referral to stop smoking agencies.

Drinking to excess is another risk factor, with those who drink and smoke heavily up to 30

times more likely to get mouth cancer. Poor diet, HPV and ethnic chewing tobacco such as *paan* and *gutkha* are also risk factors. 'Tell Me About' leaflets from the Foundation on mouth cancer, diet and smoking can be invaluable aids to help educate your patients. Encouraging them to look for ulcers which do not heal within three weeks, red or white patches or unusual changes in the mouth can also help early diagnosis.

Dental hygienists and therapists have a particularly important role to play. Ascertaining information about the patient's lifestyle before an examination will give you a better idea of their risk. All at-risk patients should have a thorough soft tissue examination to opportunistically screen for mouth cancer.

With the pattern of the disease changing and an increasing number of cancers at the rear of the tongue and in the throat occurring in younger people due to the HPV virus spread by oral sex, it is more important than ever that all patients are thoroughly screened. It is much better to arrange for referral of a patient with a

suspicious lesion if you are in any doubt.

Overall survival rates from mouth cancer remain low at only 50% but with early detection we can increase this survival rate to 90% and this is why a thorough examination is so important.

The need to be thorough and refer any suspect patients has been highlighted by the recent case of a Scottish dentist who failed to spot oral cancer. Consequently, the General Dental Council (GDC) has imposed a series of conditions on the individual. While the Foundation hopes this is an isolated incident, it reinforces the importance of a thorough examination. Early detection, a practice that will save many lives, is only made possible by encouraging patients to come in for check-ups and by being thorough.

To get involved in the campaign, here are a few things you can do:

- **Free oral examinations** – Household budgets are tight for many people at the moment. Offering patients or local groups an afternoon of free mouth cancer

examinations is a great way to support your local community. It's a good way to promote awareness of the illness, and at the same time help develop the goodwill of your practice.

- **Create a display** – One of the best ways to provide information to the public during the month is to set up a display. Use the campaign's FREE posters, alongside other educational resources available from the Foundation. Balloons are great at drawing attention to any display; try combining these with patient information leaflets, a Mouth Cancer Banner and a Mouth Cancer Self-Examination Checklist.
- **Contact the local press** – Local press are often keen to cover events in the area, especially ones for a good cause. So once you've decided on your event, get in touch with your local newspaper. This is a cost effective way of raising awareness, and promoting your dental practice.
- **Team meeting** – If a patient rang your practice complaining of a non-healing mouth ulcer, would all your staff know what advice to give? Hold a staff meeting to ensure all your team are able to advise the public. And why not ask your reception staff to send out letters to patients offering a free examination, and explaining the main risk factors and symptoms? This can be very effective!
- **The cigarette jar** – You can do a lot with an empty jar... Encourage staff and patients to put their cigarettes in the jar in return for an opportunity to win a great prize draw.
- **Request a Blue Ribbon Appeal Kit** – You can either sell the badges and retain the money, or donate it to a charity raising awareness of mouth cancer. Display the box in your reception area and encourage patients and customers to talk about mouth cancer.
- **Register Your Event** – You can register your event on our dedicated website – www.mouthcancer.org – and report back after the campaign on any cancerous or suspicious lesions found.

Here are a few facts and figures you may find useful for creating a display. You can pass these on to your patients too!

- The number of annual mouth cancer cases increased by a staggering 45.9% between 1997 and 2008
- In the UK, Scotland has the highest mouth cancer incidence rate of all the countries
- Worldwide, an estimated 405,000 new cases are diagnosed each year
- The latest figures show that cancer of the lip is three times more common in men than in women

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VITAL READER PANEL



**Diane Cox,
Dental Nurse**

'Our patients are always told that we have checked their mouths for oral cancer during their dental health assessment and that everything looks healthy, if this is the case. We reinforce the positives rather than dwelling on the negatives. Every year we hold open clinics and advertise for patients and the general public to come along to the practice for a free oral cancer screening. We also offer smoking cessation advice at all times and highlight this more in Mouth Cancer Action Month. All of our dental team are well trained in how to handle a patient who is complaining about a non-healing ulcer.'



**Vanessa Radway,
Dental Nurse**

'We will definitely be supporting Mouth Cancer Action Month at our practice. We will make our patients aware with posters and leaflets and explain that the campaign will raise awareness to check your mouth regularly and contact the dentist if you notice any changes.'



**Asma Chaudhri,
Trainee/Tutor/
Assessor in
Dental Nursing**

'I teach dental nurses so I will make my class aware of Mouth Cancer Action Month and ask the students to find out what their practices are doing to promote it!'

- Eighty-seven percent of cases in the UK occur in people aged 50 or over
- One thousand, eight hundred and twenty-two people died from mouth cancer in 2008
- Under half of those diagnosed survive beyond five years of diagnosis
- Over two thirds of mouth cancer cases are detected at a late stage, reducing chances of survival
- Early detection transforms survival chances to more than 90%
- Mouth cancer kills more people than cervical cancer and testicular cancer combined
- Tobacco use and drinking alcohol are the main risk factors and account for around three in four cases of mouth cancers
- People who both drink and use tobacco to excess are up to 30 times more likely to develop the condition
- Non-smokers who are exposed to second hand smoke at home or at work are two thirds more likely to develop the disease
- Mouth cancer is more likely to affect people over 40 years of age, though an increasing number of young people are developing the condition
- Fifty years ago mouth cancer was five times more common in men than women. Now it is only twice as common
- US studies relate the human papilloma virus (HPV) to more than 20,000 cancer cases in the past five years
- The possibility of mouth cancer remains higher for ex-smokers for 20 years or more after quitting when compared to non-smokers.

For further advice on how you can get involved, or to request your Blue Ribbon Appeal Kit, contact the British Dental Health Foundation on 01788 546365 or via email at pr@dentalhealth.org.

1. Cancer Research UK. Oral cancer statistics – UK. <http://info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerstats/types/oral/>