

HEALTH & WELLBEING

Don't let Covid-19 mask mouth cancer

BY PROFESSOR ANDREW EDER

MANY WILL have read about medical conditions being left undiagnosed or treatments being delayed as a direct result of Covid-19.

This is especially true of mouth cancers, so it is appropriate that we promote and support Mouth Cancer Action Month this November, with the latest awareness campaign by the highly regarded Oral Health Foundation (dentalhealth.org/mouthcancer).

According to the foundation, 8,722 people in the UK were diagnosed with mouth cancer over the past year. Equivalent to someone being diagnosed every hour of every day, this makes mouth cancer the 15th most common cancer in the UK, with most of these cancers being associated with the lips, tongue or soft tissues inside the mouth. Two-thirds of all new cases are seen in men, with over three quarters in those over age 55.

Lifestyle factors are key to the development of mouth cancers, with long-term tobacco use and high alcohol consumption among the most likely causes. Alongside this, there is a strong research focus into the sexually transmitted human-papilloma virus as a major causative factor. Some also make

reference to a poor diet or rough teeth being linked to mouth cancer but the evidence is weaker and genetics or a suppressed immune system may have a stronger role.

We tend to approach our doctor or dentist if we notice a problem. But with mouth cancers we may not be aware of a change. If we see our dentist for a check-up every six or 12 months, this should also include a mouth cancer check.

Having looked at your teeth, any restorations and your gums, your dentist may turn their attention to your lips, tongue and all the soft tissues inside your mouth for any changes, such as an ulcer that has not healed, a new lump or swelling, or a red or white patch. Should such a problem be identified, this might be reviewed for a few days, or referral to a specialist colleague may be suggested for possible imaging and sometimes even a biopsy.

More often than not, it is nothing and all heals well. However, on the rare occasion where a problem is identified, the earlier a diagnosis is made the better. Treatment might involve a number of specialists and perhaps chemotherapy, radiotherapy and/or surgery. If any teeth need to be removed, these may need to be replaced for the sake of one's smile and one's ability to chew. If you, a family member or someone you know has mouth cancer, Chai Cancer Care can support the whole family (see below).

PHOTO: JON LUCAS



Your dentist will look out for signs of cancer (photo taken pre-pandemic)

Visit your dentist regularly; it's about so much more than just your teeth and gums – and with an early mouth cancer diagnosis, treatment can be very effective, with few long-term health problems. To put things into perspective, over 30 years in clinical practice, I have identified three such mouth cancers early at routine check-up and all three patients are doing fine, many years on. Your dentist and your dental practice are safe – do not let Covid-19 interfere with your general health and wellbeing.

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BE MOUTH AWARE

With kind permission of the Oral Health Foundation

► **As mouth cancer can affect the lips, tongue or soft tissues inside the mouth, it is important that we all know what to look out for.**

Early detection could save your life. If you notice any changes in your mouth, please speak to your dentist or doctor immediately.

For more information or to get involved, see mouthcancer.org

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