Reasons to worry about oral cancers

By Ron Roth

Cancer from the neck up is typically associated with the tongue, throat, and voice box. But oral, head, and neck cancers can also occur in the mouth, lips, thyroid glands, nasal cavity, or sinuses.

Traditionally, tobacco and alcohol users were considered the populations at greatest risk. Now, according to new research from the American Academy of Otolaryngology, about 10 percent of new cases of oral cancer is attributed to human papillomavirus, or HPV, a sexually transmitted infection.



Ron Roth

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention claims HPV is so common nearly all men and women will get it in their lifetime. It is transmitted through vaginal, anal, and oral sex. An infected person can pass HPV on to a partner without showing any signs or symptoms.

Given the rise in oral cancers related to HPV, screening for early detection of cancer is more important than ever. According to the Harris Interactive Survey, 71 percent of Americans report they have not been examined by a medical professional for oral, head, or neck cancer.

Just because you can’t feel it doesn’t mean it isn’t there. More than 110,000 Americans are diagnosed with oral, head, or neck cancers annually. Oral, head, and neck cancers claim approximately 14,000 lives each year. However, if diagnosed early, these types of cancers may be treatable without significant complications and the chances for survival greatly increases.

Who should get tested?

Every adult should get tested. Tobacco and alcohol users have the greatest risk, and younger adults who do not smoke may get the cancer causing virus from HPV. HPV related oral cancers are difficult to detect because cancers usually occur on the back of the tongue or tonsils. Yet another reason to get regular screenings.

What are the warning signs of oral cancer?

- A sore in the mouth that does not heal
- Persistent pain in the mouth
- Lumps or white patches in the mouth
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, or moving the tongue
- Soreness in the throat or the feeling that something is caught in the throat
- Changes in the voice
- A lump on the neck.

What should you do?

Make an appointment with your primary care provider or contact an ear, nose, and throat or head, nose, and sinus specialist for an exam. Men through the age of 21 and women through the age of 26 are eligible for the HPV vaccine. Seeking help early can help avoid cancer, disfigurement, and even death.

Ron Roth is a board-certified otolaryngologist at Barton Ear, Nose, and Throat.