

Oral Sex and Oral Cancer: It's Time to Talk!

You may wonder if it's appropriate to talk about such a taboo subject as oral sex in your preventive dental appointment, but as a conscience oral health care professional, my answer is YES!

With the incidence of HPV Oral Pharyngeal Cancers (HPV-OPC) on such a rambunctious rise, increasing at about 30% per year, hygienists and dentists need to be doing a better job at screening, preventive recommendations, and at discussing the root cause—oral sex.

The American Cancer Society reported in 2024 that the incidents of oral and pharyngeal cancer from HPV is currently towering at 58,450 new cancers a year! How is that possible?

Most people are alarmed to learn that our bodies are a cesspool of virus—hosting about TEN viral particles per human cell! HPV alone is so ubiquitous that if you put a piece of scotch tape anywhere on your arm and picked it up, you'd find HPV. Fortunately, most of the 200+ strains of HPV are not a serious threat. Some strains cause the menacing warts we experience on our hands and feet, but some go on to cause cancers—mostly of the oral pharynx, cervix, anus, penis and vagina.

Historically, we have considered tobacco (smoke and smokeless) and alcohol as the primary culprits of oral cancer. Not anymore! HPV-OPC accounts for about 73% of all oral pharyngeal cancers. These too are exacerbated by smoke, booze and our all-too-commonplace acid reflux, but certain HPV strains are much more aggressive, even by themselves. They can distort human cells into malignancy, even while you remain symptom-free.

Sadly, these cancers are *not* detected in the traditional 8-point “oral cancer screening” you're routinely getting at your dental office. They take root behind the scenes—in the back in the throat (base of the tongue, tonsil area, pharyngeal wall, etc.).

Instead, the most common way HPV-OPC is detected is from a neck node enlargement. We, as a dental professionals need to devote more time focused on a thorough neck exam, palpating the entire neck with the tips of our fingers. Meanwhile, if *you* notice a neck bump, don't blow it off.

As opposed to most sexually transmitted infections, HPV infection is more prevalent in men than women. Hence the HPV-OPC rate is more than two times greater form men. Interestingly, white, middle-aged men are the predominant demographic. Why? It is thought because white men have the highest number of lifetime oral sex partners and report first performing oral sex at a younger age compared with other racial/ethnic groups.

Keep in mind that 50% of all new HPV infections occur between the ages of 15 and 24. That shocking fact behooves us to learn about the current trends in oral sexual behaviors.

As opposed to 50 years ago, today oral sex is often viewed as casual body contact, much like kissing — *and* it has become increasingly popular. More than 85% of sexually active adults aged 18-44 years report having had oral sex with a partner of the opposite sex. It's also reported that the average age for first body-part sex (including oral sex) is 11-13 years old. That is precisely the reason the HPV vaccine series targets 11- and 12-year-old children.

With HPV as our number one most prevalent sexually transmitted infection, more than two-thirds of sexually active individuals will have HPV infection at some point in their lives.

There is an easy and accurate test to detect the most cancer-causing strains—and the technology is nothing short of amazing. In a single drop of saliva, we can identify the collective presence of 51 HPV strains with exact specificity. If the most threatening strains are present, we can test again in 12-18 months to see if our patients have “cleared” the virus, for it is the *persistent infection* that brings on the burden of cancer risk.

It's true! Unlike some viruses we are familiar with, such as Herpes or HIV, Human Papilloma Virus can be cleared. Think of the nagging plantar wart on your foot that suddenly disappears without treatment after being present for years.

Clearing a virus depends on strong host immunity, in other words, generalized health. A positive HPV saliva test gives us the opportunity to move toward a healthier lifestyle: better quality and quantity sleep, nutrition, hydration, exercise and stress reduction. I advise my patients with any chronic disease, including periodontal disease, to treat their body like a temple while they are trying to shift that microbiome toward health and stability.

Many people are gun-shy about vaccination these days, but I must make you aware that the Gardasil 9 series (carrying the 9 most cancer-causing strains) is covered up to age 45 and independent research shows it will reduce the risk of HPV infections and HPV cancers by 80%.

We must also get the word out to kids that *oral sex is not safe sex*.

If you've been close to a friend, family member or patient suffering with HPV-OPC, you know the treatment is brutal. It's time to do our part better. With a few changes in our practices and dialogue, we can be part of the change we want to see in the world.



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