

Sexual Practices and Oral Cancer

First off, let state that this column is rated PG-13 as mature subject matter will be discussed in a cautious manner.

Oral cancer kills more people each year than either cervical cancer or melanoma skin cancer. I would even call it the silent cancer for two reasons. One is that most people have never heard of it. The second is usually the victim doesn't know there's a problem until it's in advanced stages.

Anybody can get oral cancer, but smoking and frequent alcohol consumption are the major risk factors. For a more detailed discussion of oral cancer, please my previous newspaper article "Oral Cancer-A Deadly Surprise" on my website www.DavidWardDDS.com.

Most people now know that the forms of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) that cause venereal warts also can cause cervical or sometimes vaginal cancer. The cervix and vagina both have a lining called mucosa. Did you know that the mucosa lining the mouth is almost identical to that lining the cervix and vagina?

Therein lies the connection. Conventional sex with an infected partner exposes women's reproductive organs to these viruses. Most women exposed never eventually develop cancer, but some do.

Oral sex is not risk free sex. One of the risks is infecting of the oral mucosa with these venereal HPV strains. Actually, some other venereal diseases can be transferred to the oral mucosa as well.

Guess what, this applies to both men and women. Oral sex, no matter which sex either partner is, can lead to HPV infection of the oral mucosa if the partner is infected. And once again, eventually these people are at risk for oral cancer development. More bad news... it is usually not obvious if a partner is infected. Most people who are infected are not even aware of it.

Even more bad news (maybe). What if you just kiss someone who has acquired oral venereal HPV through oral sex with someone else? I have not read of documented transmission in this way, but it may be possible.

So does this mean that we should be vaccinating against HPV in males as well as females to protect against cervical and oral cancer. This question is just now starting to be researched so no one knows if it would help. It is worth considering.

So what's the bottom line? Abstain from promiscuous sex, whether it be conventional or oral. Avoid tobacco and frequent alcohol. See your dentist at least once a year for a thorough oral cancer exam. If suspicious lesions are found, biopsy them, if possible, with the very minimally invasive techniques (similar to Pap Smear) available today.

Dr David Ward practices dentistry in Big Spring. He is immediate past president of the Permian Basin District Dental Society. He also is a member of the American and Texas Dental Associations as well as the Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry and the Academy of GP Orthodontics.