

Early detection crucial to treat mouth cancer

Vaccine warning to parents ahead of flu season

HEALTH

with
Dr Zak
Uddin



IN a new weekly feature, North-East GP Dr Zak Uddin examines a topical issue, and answers readers' questions. This week, Dr Zak looks at one of the less well known cancers to coincide with Mouth Cancer Awareness Month

MOUTH cancer, also referred to as oral cancer, includes any cancer affecting the structures inside the mouth, as well as the lips and the back of the mouth where it connects to the windpipe. This is called the pharynx.

With around 7,000 new cases of mouth cancer diagnosed every year in the UK, it accounts for two per cent of all new cancer cases.

It is rare in people younger than 50, although a rise in the under 40 age group has been linked to the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), transmitted through unprotected oral sex.

As with many cancers, lifestyle choices play a big role. Tobacco and alcohol, especially if the latter is consumed in excess, are strongly linked with the disease, and are implicated in three quarters of all cases.

In combination, alcohol makes the mouth more po-



CHECK-UP: November is Mouth Cancer Awareness Month. Dr Zak Uddin warns that regular dental check ups are crucial to diagnosing early oral changes

rous, so it absorbs more of the harmful chemicals in tobacco.

Other risk factors for mouth cancer are lack of self-care, including a poor diet which is low in fruit and vegetables, as well as bad oral hygiene.

Although every mouth is unique, you should be aware of any change in your own. Things to look out for include a new red or white patch in the mouth, a new lump in the mouth or neck, or an ulcer that does not heal.

Do not ignore an ulcer or skin change on the lips as these are also part of the oral cavity.

If any of the above are present for more than three weeks, it is important that you consult either your routine GP or dentist as your first priority, particularly if you smoke or drink more than the recommended amount of alcohol.

If they are concerned, you will be referred to the local hospital where a maxillofacial surgeon will examine you and take a small sample, known as a biopsy, of anything that looks suspicious.

While this seems alarming, early detection and treatment of mouth cancer means that a cure may be achieved

in up to 90 per cent of cases.

HOWEVER, as the saying goes, prevention is better than cure, and if you have any of the risk factors that can be altered, doing so may benefit not just to your oral health, but your overall wellbeing as well.

This would include adopting a Mediterranean style diet, which emphasises the importance of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Bringing your alcohol consumption in line with the UK Government's advice of 14 units or less per week and stopping smoking if applica-

ble, are undoubtedly the way forward.

Safer sex, using condoms, reduces the risk of HPV transmission.

Finally, ensuring you attend regular dental check-ups means a trained professional will be able to spot any changes that you might miss at an early stage, as well as maintaining your oral hygiene.

Useful websites

www.mouthcancer.org

www.bda.org/mouth-cancer

www.mouthcancerfoundation.org

Health matters: Dr Zak answers your questions

Q I've been called for my routine cervical smear, but I don't want to go. The last time was painful and I've only slept with my husband, so I don't think I'm really at risk, am I?
Angela, 40

A I empathise with your feelings towards having a smear. It sounds like your last experience was unpleasant and that has stuck in your mind. However, the cervical screening programme is vitally important for picking up cancer at a point before you have

symptoms, and if cancer or pre-cancerous cells are found at this point, you will likely require less treatment, with a greater chance of complete cure.

Unfortunately monogamy is not a guarantee against cervical cancer, and cervical cancer has been seen in women who have not had sex, although the risk is much less.

Q I was told at my last health check that I was clinically obese, which upset me a lot. I've always been on the big side, but I was told that if I don't lose

weight, I'm putting myself at risk of heart disease and diabetes.
Mark, 45

A It sounds like you have always struggled with your weight, which is an increasing problem in today's fast paced society.

Obesity is linked with many physical diseases, as well as poor self-esteem.

Your health check will have looked at your bloods, and if no problems have been found, it is important to address your diet and exer-

cise. To lose any significant weight may take at least six to twelve months.

If you hadn't made any progress by then, your GP may discuss referring you to a specialist weight management clinic.

It is important to say that many people get excellent results from this, without ever needing a weight-loss operation.

Do you have a question for Dr Zak? You can email him via askdoctorzak@gmail.com, visit the website doctorzak.co.uk

or follow him on Twitter @AskDoctorZak

Dr Uddin's advice is provided in good faith and in accordance with currently accepted evidence. However, this content is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. You should always seek the advice of a GP, or other qualified health provider, regarding a medical condition.

By Ella Pickover
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CHILDREN are "super spreaders" of flu, England's top medic said as she urged parents to get their children vaccinated ahead of what has been dubbed as a "pressurised" flu season.

Health officials are pushing for eligible children to get their flu jabs.

Professor Dame Sally Davies, chief medical officer for England, said this "not only protects them but also those around them".

The campaign comes amid concerns that this flu season could overwhelm the nation's hospitals.

Last month the Society for Acute Medicine warned that routine operations could "cease for several months" if hospitals have to deal with a major flu outbreak.

In September, NHS England boss Simon Stevens warned hospitals to be prepared for a "pressurised" flu season following a heavy outbreak in the Southern Hemisphere.

Mr Stevens said the health service was reviewing the situation in Australia and New Zealand, where hospitals were forced to close their doors to new patients and people faced long waiting times. Now Public Health England (PHE) is urging parents whose children have not yet been vaccinated against flu to do so before the winter flu season begins.

School children in reception class as well as those in years two, three and four are eligible for a free nasal spray vaccination in school.

Pre-schoolers aged two and over can get their nasal spray from their GP surgery.

PHE said young children were particularly vulnerable to flu and were most likely to spread flu to others.

Giving them the vaccine protected them as well as stopping them from passing the illness to more vulnerable groups.

Flu and complications associated with it cause 8,000 deaths on average a year in England, PHE added.

Dame Sally said: "Any child can catch flu, thousands do every year and some end up in hospital as a result. Parents should not be complacent - the single most effective way to protect your children against flu this winter is to get them vaccinated with the simple nasal spray.

"Children can be super spreaders so getting them vaccinated not only protects them but also those around them."