



Pat Sullivan fights oral cancer: What are its signs and symptoms?

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As Auburn and Alabama prepare for a battle on the gridiron, former Auburn quarterback and Heisman Trophy winner Pat Sullivan is fighting his own battle -- with oral cancer. Sullivan, who has agreed to lend his name and support to Alabama's campaign to prevent smokeless tobacco use, is currently being treated with chemotherapy and will begin radiation treatment in December as a result of a cancer detected on his tongue. Knowing the signs and symptoms of oral cancer may benefit you and encourage you to see your dentist regularly for early detection of these cancers.

Among males, cancer of the mouth and throat is the 6th most common cancer. Nationally there are 30,000 new cases diagnosed each year and about 8,000 deaths from oral cancer. There are as many cases of oral cancer as there are from leukemia or cervical cancer. State Dental Director Dr. Stuart Lockwood of the Alabama Department of Public Health says, "Six hundred of these new oral cancers and 150 of the deaths occur in Alabama each year. Further, the 2003 Oral Health America Report Card gave Alabama a D- for oral cancer because our rate of oral cancer has increased over the past 20 years."

Typically those at greatest risk for oral cancer are adults over age 40 with a history of tobacco use and/or alcohol use. Pat Sullivan acknowledged, "I did use smokeless tobacco. I will never again. I'll be a strong advocate for not using it. We think we are invincible, but we're not."

Recent studies have indicated that about 30 percent of boys in grades 9-12 in Alabama used smokeless tobacco in the past month, 7.5 percent of adult males in the state (twice the national average) are spit tobacco users, and that 26 percent of adults and about 26 percent of adolescents use cigarettes in Alabama.

Reports now indicate increases in populations traditionally considered at low risk--women and young adults. While smoking and other tobacco use are associated with 70-80 percent of oral cancer cases, 25 percent of patients do not fall into the tobacco/alcohol user category. Examination, whether a person is at risk or not, is essential at your routine dental visit.

Dr. William Chesser, president of the Alabama Dental Association, says that any oral cancer exam should include your lips, gums, cheek lining and tongue, as well as the floor and roof of your mouth, noting any of the following:

- a color change in the oral tissues (whitish or red spots, for example)
- a lump, thickening, rough spot, crust or small eroded area;
- a sore that bleeds easily or does not heal;

- pain, tenderness or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips;
- difficulty in chewing, swallowing, speaking or moving the jaw or tongue;
- changes in the voice;
- a change in the way your teeth fit together.

Also beyond the mouth look for drastic weight loss; or a lump or mass in your neck. If any of these conditions persists, says Dr. Chesser, contact your dentist for an examination.

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