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Mouth cancer and sexual behavior

Is there a correlation? *by Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I have heard there is a correlation between oral sex and increased risk of mouth cancer. Is that true?

A: Partially. The risk of oral cancer is not increased from sexual contact in itself but from transmission of certain high risk types of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) through intimate contact.

HPV is one of the most common virus groups in the world and has many types. The low risk types cause skin lesions such as warts. The high-risk types are linked to approximately 90% of cervical cancers in women. Recent studies show these same high-risk types cause approximately 60% of cancers in the mouth, including tongue, tonsils and throat. The threat is for men and women alike.

How common is it? According to the CDC, 20 million Americans are currently infected with HPV while another 6 million are newly infected each year.

HPV type 16 poses the highest patient risk for oral cancers—up to 32 times more susceptibility, depending on the viral count. YIKES!! That was a shocking statistic to me when I compared it to smoking (3 times the risk) and habitual alcohol use (2 times).

So how do you know if you are infected? HPV infections do not typically cause any clinical signs or symptoms. Fortunately there is now a simple, professional test called OraRisk™ that can detect HPV infection very early. It is a swish (saline solution), gargle and spit test administered in your dental office and analyzed by Oral DNA Labs.

Why be tested? If you and your dentist learn that you are at high risk for developing oral or pharyngeal cancer you will likely want to increase the frequency of your oral cancer examinations. The earlier oral cancer is detected, the more successfully it is treated. Also, since high-risk HPVs are more significant in higher counts, it might make sense for you to identify and avoid the potential for re-exposure.

Don't be afraid to discuss your risks for oral cancer with your dentist. Together you might save your ability to swallow or chew, save yourself from severe disfigurement, or even save your life!

One last nudge: Help spread the word to teens and sexually active adults, that despite what they might have heard, *oral sex* does not mean *safe sex*!

