

Mouth Cancer Awareness Week – November 13-19

CASE STUDY – Stephen Lee Ostrowski, 47, West Drayton, Heathrow

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Local man who beat deadly disease talks of its effects on his life

Mouth cancer kills one person every five hours in the UK. In addition, one in two sufferers dies as a result of the condition. However, with early detection survival chances increase significantly.

It is nearly three years since 47-year-old Dad of one, Stephen Lee Ostrowski, first noticed a lump on his tongue. Although initially dismissed as 'nothing serious', Stephen was keen to see a specialist and visited Wrexham Park Hospital. A few days later he was diagnosed with mouth cancer.

The intense radiotherapy sessions that followed had a big effect on Stephen, both physically and emotionally.

He commented: "It has had a massive impact.

"For five months I was practically immobile because of fatigue from radiotherapy. I had to be fed through a stomach peg linked to a feeding pump.

"I was in immense pain and my weight plummeted. I felt terrible and rarely went anywhere at all for the first year of my illness."

"My Fiancée, to whom I proposed to shortly before it all started, nursed me through so many difficult nights. She took me to hospital daily and comforted me when even the morphine didn't help. I was extremely lucky not to have lost her."

Stephen was speaking in the run-up to Mouth Cancer Awareness Week (November 13-19). This year's campaign is using the tagline 'It Could Be You' to inform people that mouth cancer can strike anyone at any time, so it is important to be aware of the symptoms.

Men are twice as likely to develop mouth cancer as women, although the ratio of women to men suffering with the condition has grown by a third in the last 10 years.

Smoking and drinking alcohol to excess are the main risk factors for mouth cancer and, because alcohol aids the absorption of tobacco into the mouth, people who smoke and drink are up to 30 times more likely to develop the condition! A poor diet is also a contributory factor.

Before being diagnosed with his condition Stephen both smoked and drank alcohol very regularly.

It is now more than two-and-a-half years since Stephen was treated for mouth cancer, but he is still feeling the weight of the after effects.

He continued: "I have lost my old confidence completely. I can't eat what I want so I'm cautious of eating out anywhere and I've lost my sparkle.

"I suffer with a very dry mouth and throat which can cause blockage, as well as impaired breathing and neck muscle cramp.

"Everything is different now. I am constantly on and off Anti-depressants and at the time of writing have yet to return to work – though I now have some applications pending for jobs.

However, with 25% of younger people who develop the condition demonstrating none of the risk factors, it is vital that people are aware of the symptoms even if they live a healthy lifestyle.

Dr Carter, chief executive of the British Dental Health Foundation, who co-ordinate the awareness campaign, commented: "Early detection is the key to surviving mouth cancer, so we need to be examining our own mouths regularly.

"Look out for any unusual lumps or red or white patches in the mouth and if you have an ulcer that hasn't healed after three weeks, get it checked by your dentist or doctor immediately.

"Self examination is now the norm for breast cancer and testicular cancer – it needs to be the same for mouth cancer."

Members of the public can show their support for increasing mouth cancer awareness by purchasing the Campaign Blue Ribbon pin badge. The ribbon is available for only £1 including postage. Send the donation with a SAE to British Dental Health Foundation, 2 East Union Street, Rugby, CV22 6AJ. The money raised from the sale of ribbons will be used to expand the Foundation's work on improving awareness of mouth cancer, which could save lives.

Mouth Cancer Awareness Week is coordinated by the British Dental Health Foundation, supported by Denplan, and backed by a wide range of leading national health organisations. These include Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), British Dental Association, British Association of Head and Neck Oncologists, British Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons, Cancer Research UK, the health departments of the four UK countries, GKT, Mouth Cancer Foundation, Pharmacy Health Link, QUIT and Scope.

ENDS

Editor's notes

For further information or to arrange an interview with Stephen please contact the Foundation's Press Office on 0870 770 4014 or pr@dentalhealth.org.uk

You can get a copy of the logo, a picture of an examination and various other resources from the website www.mouthcancer.org.

RISK FACTORS AND SYMPTOMS

Risks

Men are twice as likely as women to develop mouth cancer, though the gap is closing fast. Ten years ago they were three times as likely.

Over 45's are more at risk of developing the condition, and around 80% of sufferers fall into this age group.

The main risk factors of mouth cancer are smoking, drinking alcohol to excess and poor diet.

The three key messages are:

- Cut out smoking and all forms of tobacco
- Cut down on alcohol
- Eat healthily

Smoking

Smoking is the number one cause of mouth cancer.

According to research published in the British Journal of Cancer, cigarette smoke transforms saliva into a deadly cocktail that damages cells in the mouth and can turn them cancerous.

Patients need to be strongly encouraged to give up smoking.

They also need to be aware that switching to low-tar cigarettes will not help.

Research has found that smokers of 'light' cigarettes inhale more smoke from their cigarettes and take longer puffs – resulting in just as many cancer-causing poisons as smokers of regular cigarettes.

Smokeless Tobacco

Although some people believe that chewing tobacco is safer than smoking, the reality is that it is even more dangerous.

Chewing tobacco, paan, areca nut and gutkha are habits favoured by some ethnic groups. In the UK and other countries, some of these brands are marketed like sweets and, as no mention is made of tobacco on the packaging, they can unwittingly be sold to children.

Alcohol

Although much less documented, alcohol poses almost as big a risk as smoking when it comes to mouth cancer. In addition, because alcohol aids the absorption of tobacco into the mouth, people who smoke and drink alcohol to excess are up to 30 times more likely to develop mouth cancer.

The important thing is not the type of drink that is consumed but the total volume of alcohol.

It is recommended that men drink no more than 3-4 units per day and women drink no more than 2-3. One unit is the equivalent to a glass of wine, a single measure of spirits or half a pint of beer, lager or cider.

Diet

It is estimated that poor diet is linked to a third of all cancer cases. There is a large body of evidence showing that an increase in fruit and vegetables lowers the risk of developing mouth cancer. Fish and eggs can also reduce the risk.

It is recommended that people enjoy a healthy, balanced diet, including food from each of the major food groups and including fruit and vegetables of all different colours as each colour contains different vitamins.

Symptoms

However, with 25% of cases in younger people presenting none of the common risk factors everyone needs to be aware of the symptoms of mouth cancer, and the importance of self-examination. Early detection improves survival chances considerably.

Possible symptoms

The most common symptoms of mouth cancer are a non-healing mouth ulcer or a red or white patch on the tongue, gums or lining of the mouth.

People are advised to visit their dentist or doctor if they have had a mouth ulcer that hasn't healed for three weeks.

Other less common symptoms can include pain on chewing or swallowing, a sore throat that won't go away, a pain in the ear, change in the voice or unusual pain, bleeding or numbness in the mouth. Although these symptoms could be caused by an entirely unrelated health problem, it is recommended that people with these symptoms should see a health professional for advice.

Self examination

Self examination is as important for mouth cancer as it is for breast cancer or testicular cancer.

People need to be encouraged to check their mouth on a regular basis. If they notice any unusual changes they should book an appointment with their dentist or doctor immediately.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- In the UK over 4,300 new cases of mouth cancer are diagnosed annually
- Around 1,700 people die of mouth cancer every year
- The number of new mouth cancer cases increased by more than 17 percent in the last four years
- Mouth cancer is more common in men than women, but the gap is closing
- Mouth cancer is more likely to affect people over 40 years of age, though an increasing number of young people are developing the condition
- Smoking, drinking alcohol and poor diet are major risk factors
- Risk rises dramatically for people who are both smokers and heavy drinkers

- Early detection and treatment considerably increases survival chances, allows for simpler treatment and results in a better quality of life for sufferers
- Only six percent of people demonstrate unprompted awareness of mouth cancer
- Of the people who have heard of mouth cancer 76 percent are aware of a link between smoking and developing the condition, but only 19 percent of people are aware of a link to alcohol misuse
- People aged between 25 and 34 years have the highest knowledge about the links between mouth cancer, smoking and alcohol

Notes

The British Dental Health Foundation is the UK's leading oral health charity, with a 30-year track record of providing public information and influencing government policy. It maintains a free consumer advice service, an impartial and objective product accreditation scheme, publishes and distributes a wide range of literature for the profession and consumers, and runs National Smile Week each May, to promote greater awareness of the benefits of better oral health.

The Dental Helpline, which offers free impartial dental advice to consumers, can be contacted on 0845 063 1188 between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday or by e-mailing helpline@dentalhealth.org.uk.

If you do not wish to receive further press releases from the British Dental Health Foundation, please reply to this e-mail.