While some think it is rare, oral cancer will be newly diagnosed in almost 100 individuals each day in the United States. On average, one person will die from the disease every hour of every day.\(^1\) Like many cancers, the key to surviving oral cancer is early detection.

During the month of April, we are once again part of a national effort to increase awareness about oral cancer.

Historically the death rate associated with this cancer is particularly high not because it is hard to discover or diagnose, but because the cancer is routinely discovered late in its development. Detecting oral cancer in its early stages can dramatically increase the five-year survival rate from approximately 57 percent to more than 90 percent.\(^2\)

Many people visit their dentist more frequently than their physician. This puts dental professionals in a unique position to detect many diseases, including oral cancer.

Dentists play a crucial role in calling attention to some of oral cancer’s common symptoms by performing an oral cancer exam on patients. That’s why Dr. Jed Jacobson, chief science officer and senior vice president of Delta Dental of Michigan, Ohio and Indiana, recommends regular dental visits and oral cancer exams at each visit.

“Regular visits to the dentist are the best way to detect cancerous and precancerous cells in early stages,” said Jacobson. “An oral cancer exam is quick and painless involving an evaluation of the head, neck, mouth, gums, throat and tongue.”

During the process, the dentist will use a piece of gauze to pull the tongue forward and move it from side to side. Oral cancer symptoms include:

- Red or white spots that appear on the gums, cheeks or under the tongue
- Swelling of the tongue or throat
- A lump in the mouth or neck
- Pain or difficulty swallowing or chewing
- Numbness in the mouth region
- Vocal hoarseness that lasts for an extended time
- Tiny marks that resemble canker sores
- Sores that bleed and don’t heal (in later stages)

If a dentist notices a suspicious spot or lesion, her or he may use a tool called the OralCDx brush biopsy. This can be used to catch oral cancer in its early stages, or even as a precancerous lesion.\(^3\) Delta Dental is one of the first dental benefits providers in the U.S. to add coverage of the brush biopsy procedure to its core group of covered services.

OralCDx Laboratories, Inc. of New York holds a patent on the brush biopsy, approved in 2000 by the Federal Drug Administration. The brush biopsy is based on the technology used in the Star Wars anti-missile system. It detects precancerous and cancerous cells in healthy tissue the same way the defense satellites were designed to detect real missiles from decoys.

There are two distinct pathways by which most people come to oral cancer. One is through the use of tobacco and alcohol, a long term historic cause. The other is through exposure to human papilloma viruses, which, as recently reported in USA Today, may affect as many as 7 percent of Americans aged 14-69, though most infected will not develop cancer. The HPV-16 virus is the most common sexually transmitted infection and is also responsible for the vast majority of cervical cancers in women.\(^4\)

Remember, prevention and early detection are the keys to keeping oral cancer at bay and maybe even saving your life.