

SURVIVING ORAL CANCER

Relaying the message

■ Woman latches on to screenings as cause

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The story Joana Breckner wants to tell started in a dental chair 14 years ago.

Dr. Phillip Sacks, her dentist since she was 10, pulled at her lip and poked at her tongue after a cleaning. He told her she should see an oral surgeon.

"He said, 'You have these white spots in your mouth,'" she said.

The screening started a journey that included biopsies, grafts that moved tissue from her forearm to her tongue and therapy that taught her how to eat.

She morphed from being a patient to a survivor to an advocate for oral cancer screenings.

"She's been to hell and back," said Dr. Gary Bellack, a head and neck surgeon from Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

Breckner didn't smoke. She drank an occasional glass of wine. She didn't have human papillomavirus, the sexually transmitted disease better known as HPV.

Now 44 and a Westlake Village resident who carts her two daughters to

See **ADVOCATE**, 2A

ORAL CANCER

The cancers are often not noticed in the early stages by patients, according to The Oral Cancer Foundation. Often, it is detected only after it has spread.

ONLINE INFO

- Risk groups: <http://oralcancerfoundation.org/understanding/risk-factors.php>
- Link to HPV: <http://oralcancerfoundation.org/hpv/>
- Numbers: <http://seer.cancer.gov/statfacts/html/oralcav.html>
- Resources: <http://www.oralcancerfoundation.org/resources/>
- Screening: <http://1.usa.gov/1HsMkc>



TROY HARVEY/THE STAR

Joana Breckner, of Westlake Village, is shown in her home Wednesday. Breckner is a survivor of oral cancer who advocates that all people have early and frequent screenings for the disease.

clarinet and horseback lessons, Breckner wasn't even on the edge of the groups at risk for mouth or throat cancer.

She wasn't surprised to hear the verdict on the white patches so small she couldn't see them.

"It was benign," she said.

The abnormal patch was surgically removed. But it came back and stayed for years. Then it grew.

"(Bellack) said we don't even have to biopsy. It's a tumor," Breckner said.

About 42,000 people will be diagnosed with oral cancer this year. About 38 percent of them will die in five years, according to the American Cancer Association.

Breckner's cancer didn't appear to have spread. After the tumor was removed at Cedars, tests showed no need for radiation or chemotherapy. The malignancy was gone.

"We got it," she said. "We got it."

RECURRENCE

There are no guarantees in cancer. Breckner thought five years was the key. If she could pass the time without signs of the disease, she might be home-free.

She was eating popcorn in a theater four years, six months after surgery. When she tried to dislodge a piece stuck in her teeth, it was like touching an open sore.

Doctors found a growth and biopsied it. The cancer was more than back. It was growing.

"It took off like pouring gasoline on a fire," Bellack



TROY HARVEY/THE STAR

Dr. Phillip Sacks and oral cancer survivor Joana Breckner laugh during a routine checkup Tuesday afternoon.

said. "On a scale of 1 to 10, it was probably a 12."

She had 10 hours of surgery at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center on Feb. 13, 2012. Doctors removed the tumor, half her tongue, several teeth and part of her jawbone.

They performed an operation called free flap, using tissue from the underside of her forearm to rebuild her tongue. A graft from her thigh repaired her forearm.

She spent six days in the hospital in a room decorated with a photograph of her husband, Joe, and their girls, Talia and Sarah. Next to it was the sign she made on her computer.

"I'm going through this to live," it said.

FALLING AGAIN

The hurdles continued at home. She received chemotherapy every Monday. Radiation came five days a week.

She lived on pain

medication and smoothies, finally graduating to half of one cooked carrot.

"I called my husband, and we celebrated," she said.

The baby steps grew. She went through speech therapy, ditching a cell-phone number because pronouncing the sixes was hard.

She started driving her children to music lessons again. The family vacationed in Utah, Israel and then England.

"I felt like a million bucks," she said.

And then the roller coaster dipped.

She woke up in the middle of the night. Her neck throbbed. Doctors found a tumor on her jugular vein.

It meant another surgery in January 2013. She went through eight more weeks of radiation and chemo. This time, she lost her hair.

More than a year later, tests show no signs of

cancer. Bellack said her prognosis is good.

Breckner still thinks about the what-ifs.

"Every day," she said.

ADVOCATING

Breckner is driven to tell her story. Friends say the reason for the calls and emails to editors and reporters is obvious.

"She wants ink," said her friend Amy Levy, a public relations specialist. "She wants you to tell the world to go to the dentist to make sure you don't have what she has."

It is in a way payment on a debt.

"I made a lot of promises when I was sick ... to God or whoever was listening," Breckner said. "If I made it, I would do my share."

She wants people to know oral cancer can strike people who are not in the risk groups. She wants pediatric dentists to tell parents that an increasing number of throat

cancers have been linked to exposure to HPV.

"I am not advocating every boy and girl receives the HPV vaccination, but with the facts, parents can make a more informed decision," she said.

She focuses most on the day 14 years ago when her dentist took 90 seconds to examine her mouth and found spots on her tongue.

Her fear is that some dentists may not conduct screenings or provide information about risks. She worries that patients don't know to ask.

"I truly believe early screening saved my life," she said.

Some groups question the value of oral cancer screenings. In a Consumer Reports study a year ago, oral tests were found unnecessary for people who are not in the high-risk groups. That research drew protests from the American Dental Association.

A national panel of experts called the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force did a study on whether primary care doctors should screen for oral cancer. The group said too little evidence supports a recommendation for or against screening but added that its advice was aimed at physicians, not dentists.

Breckner said she understands concerns about unnecessary biopsies or tests that may be triggered by screenings. She thinks a patient in a dental chair has a right to a first line of defense.

"Whether or not the medical community says it's necessary, I can sit in that chair and ask for it, to make sure I'm healthy," she said.