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Cancer survivor still seeks new 'normal'

By Sylvie Belmond
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A Westlake Village mother of two is still searching for her new normal after almost seven years of treatment for oral cancer.

Joana Breckner, 44, a community volunteer who has been cancer-free for about a year, advocates early screening for cancers affecting the mouth because early detection means improved chances for recovery.

Unlike guidelines for breast, colon and prostate cancers, there is no national program for oral cancer screenings.

"I just want people to be aware and ask questions," Breckner said.

When oral cancers are discovered early, serious problems, such as facial deformities and the loss of the sense of taste or the ability to speak are reduced, said Breckner, whose dentist first noticed small white spots on her tongue during a routine cleaning in 2000. He referred her to an ear, nose and throat specialist.

The specialist removed the benign patch, called leukoplakia, which is linked to an increased risk for mouth cancer, and monitored Breckner's oral health for several years. In 2007 he identified and removed a small cancerous tumor from her tongue.

When the cancer reappeared more aggressively four years later, Breckner underwent a 10-hour surgery at UCLA that involved the removal of half of her tongue and reconstructive



BEFORE DIAGNOSIS—Joana Breckner flashes a smile prior to learning she has oral cancer. Her dentist noticed spots during a routine cleaning in 2000.

surgery using skin and tissue from her forearm.

In 2013, Breckner returned to the hospital to have another malignancy removed from her jugular vein.

According to the Oral Cancer Foundation, someone in the U.S. dies from oral cancer every hour of every day, and more than 43,000 people will be newly diagnosed with oral cancer in 2014.

The foundation says this is the fifth year in a row that's seen an increase in the occurrence of oral cancers.

When found early, oral cancer patients have an 80 to 90 percent chance of survival. But the majority of these cancers are found late, which accounts for a death rate of 43 percent within five years of diagnosis.

The American Dental Association estimates that 60 percent of the U.S. population visit a dentist every year, but fewer than 15 percent of them report having received a screening for oral cancer.

A 90-second dental examination could save lives, according to the association.

Breckner's dentist, Phillip Sacks of Woodland Hills, said he's been routinely screening his patients for mouth cancers for over 40 years.

"The technology advances in oral screenings will allow me to be even more thorough, especially as I see an increased number of patients with early signs of cancer," the dentist said.

Because of early detection by her dentist and lifesaving surgeries and treatments by her doctors, Breckner said, she is lucky to be alive and is grateful that she can eat, drink and taste.

Despite a slight speech impairment, she is able to speak and be understood.

Breckner said patients need to talk to their dentists about oral cancer.

"We also need to be vigilant about choosing the right dentist who is on top of the latest medi-

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Breckner

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cal advances in oral cancer detection.”

Risk factors include the use of tobacco, alcohol consumption and exposure to the HPV virus.

But, like Breckner, who does not smoke or drink alcohol regularly, anyone can develop oral cancer.

While undergoing radiation and chemotherapy in 2012 and 2013, she could not taste food and was unable to speak. She had to drink all her meals.

She said her family was able to carry on with the help of friends, neighbors and relatives, who took turns providing warm meals and offering other support.

Breckner said her husband, Joe, was instrumental in her recovery.

“Cancer or any illness is so stressful on families, and during this time my husband was the person that kept our family together,” she said, adding that she



Joana Breckner now

also found help through Cancer Support Community in Westlake Village and CancerFit, a local

nonprofit that provides fitness training for people affected by cancer.

Breckner’s longtime friend Amy Levy, who owns a public relations firm, said the community helped Breckner because she had been there for them.

“The ordeal that she went through was an extremely difficult one, but because she is such a loving friend, daughter, sister, mom, wife and contributing member of our community, everyone in her life rose to the occasion to be by her side,” Levy said.

Breckner’s new normal includes practicing mindfulness and yoga, along with sessions of acupuncture and speech therapy.

ACORNBITS

Symptoms of oral cancer to watch for

Although oral cancer frequently has no symptoms, when they do occur, the most common include:

- a sore or ulcer on the lip or in the mouth that does not heal
- a lump on the lip, in the mouth or on the neck
- a white or red patch on the gums, tongue or lining of the mouth
- unusual bleeding, pain or numbness in the mouth
- oral pain that does not go away
- difficulty or pain when chewing, swallowing or opening the jaw
- swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable
- tooth loosening
- bad breath
- sensory loss in the face
- abnormal taste in the mouth
- tongue problems

Courtesy of Marty Jablow

DMD