

## HEALTH FOCUS

## Hepatitis C awareness

HEPATITIS C IS an infection of the liver caused by a virus. As many as 3.9 million people in the U.S. have hepatitis C, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Many people with hepatitis C have no symptoms and do not know they are infected.

Acute hepatitis C, in the first several months after infection, can range in severity from a mild illness with few or no symptoms to a serious condition requiring hospitalization. Symptoms can include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, upset stomach, vomiting, dark urine, gray-colored stool, joint pain and yellow skin and eyes.

About 20 percent of people are able to get rid of the virus without treatment in the first six months; those unable to get rid of it may develop a chronic lifelong infection that over time can cause liver disease, liver failure and liver cancer.

## TESTING AND TREATMENT

The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is to get tested. The CDC recommends testing for persons who:

- Were born between 1945 and 1965.
- Received donated blood or organs before 1992.
- Have ever injected drugs, including steroids.
- Have HIV or AIDS.
- Have abnormal liver tests or liver disease.
- Have had exposure to someone with hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C can be treated, but treatment depends on several factors, so it is important to see a doctor experienced in treating it. New and improved treatments are available that can cure hepatitis C for many people.

## PREVENTION

To prevent hepatitis C, safeguard yourself in the following ways:

- Avoid sharing or reusing needles, syringes or any other injection equipment.
- Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood, such as razors or toothbrushes.
- Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.

For more information, search for the hepatitis C fact sheet on the CDC website, [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov).—David Wight



# Detecting oral cancer

BY JOANA BRECKNER



A ROUTINE dentist visit saved my life

I am a four-year survivor of oral cancer. I am married, 47 years old and the mother of two girls, ages 10 and 12. I am not a smoker or

drinker, and have been in good health my entire life.

In 2000, during a teeth cleaning, my dentist discovered precancerous white spots on my tongue. The biopsy was benign, but for the next seven years I was monitored by my dentist and doctor. My first tumor, small and contained, was removed in 2007.

Four years later, my cancer returned. I underwent a 10-hour surgery removing half my tongue, which was rebuilt with grafts from my forearm, followed up by radiation and chemotherapy. A year later cancer reoccurred on my jugular vein. More surgery, more chemotherapy, more radiation.

Four years later, my story has a happy ending, and by sharing it I hope to raise awareness of oral cancer and screenings.

Traditionally, individuals with the highest risk of developing oral cancer have been those who smoke, use tobacco or drink alcohol heavily, but exposure to the human papillomavirus (HPV) is now a significant factor. The fastest-growing oral cancer population is young nonsmokers with HPV.

Currently there is no national program for oral cancer screenings. The American Dental Association states that “just doing ‘opportunistic’ cancer screenings ... would yield tens of thousands of opportunities to catch oral cancer in its early stages.” According to the Oral Cancer Foundation, when oral cancer is found at early stages of development, patients have an 80 to 90 percent survival rate.

Here are easy, potentially lifesaving steps to take charge of your oral health.

- Be sure your dentist or qualified hygienist “cleans and screens” at every routine visit. This visual and manual

## RESOURCES

*Oral cancer frequently has no symptoms. When symptoms 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 in 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 with chewing, swallowing or jaw opening.
- Swelling of the jaw that causes dentures to fit poorly or become uncomfortable.
- Tooth loosening.
- Sensory loss in the face.
- Abnormal taste in the mouth.
- Tongue problems.—/JB

screening takes less than five minutes.

- There is a strong link between HPV and oral cancer. Ask your children's pediatrician and dentist for more information about the HPV vaccination. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends boys and girls receive the HPV vaccination at age 11 or 12.

- If a sore throat or swallowing problems persist for more than two weeks, contact your doctor.

I am alive because of early detection and lifesaving surgeries and treatments. My quality of life is excellent, and I am able to eat, drink, taste and live pain-free. A scar running from my lip to my chin and a slight speech impediment remind me of cancer every day. Like many survivors, I am searching for my new normal. However, I am alive, loving life and grateful—especially for my conscientious dentist. **C**

*Costco member Joana Breckner is a cancer advocate and professional organizer.*