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Oral HPV and Oral Cancer: Are You At Risk?

One of the most common virus groups in the world is known as the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). Its health risk to an individual is determined by the type of virus: low-risk or high-risk. A low-risk virus may cause skin lesions, such as warts, while a high-risk virus may cause an HPV infection, which could lead to cancer.

Approximately 90% of cervical cancers are linked to high-risk types of HPV. Research shows that these same high-risk types of HPV can cause cancers of the mouth, tongue, tonsil and throat areas. Some types of oral HPV are thought to be a serious risk factor for developing cancer in the head and neck regions, and are showing increasing risk for development of oral cancers.

The OraRisk HPV Test has been designed to help diagnose this infection early on. This test of your saliva is designed to measure an increased risk for oral cancer and can be performed by a qualified oral health professional.

During your routine oral health exam, your oral health professional can perform this easy test using a sterile saline rinse to determine if an oral HPV infection is present. You will be asked to gargle for 30 seconds with this saline rinse, and deposit your specimen in a small, coded container to be processed. Once read, your oral health care professional will contact you to discuss the results.

Approximately 20 million Americans are currently infected with HPV, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and millions more are being infected each year. Transmission of HPV in its most common forms is relatively easy and can occur simply

through close contact between people. These transmissions tend to be low-risk. The more serious types of HPV, which may lead to cervical or oral cancer and are considered high-risk, are sexually transmitted.

The signs and symptoms of oral HPV infections vary depending on the type of HPV that is present in the infection. For those with low-risk oral HPV, a wart (or papilloma) may be present. In high-risk cases, there may be a sore that won't heal; a sign of concern of potential cancer. Early on, oral HPV infections don't necessarily produce clinical signs or symptoms, so a visual exam is not an option for detection. The OralRisk HPV test, however, is a simple diagnostic tool that can enable your oral health care professional to detect oral HPV infections early on.

Those who should be tested for Oral HPV include:

- Anyone with known risk factors for oral cancer, such as smoking and alcohol
- Sexually active males and females
- Those with a family history of oral cancer

According to the Oral Cancer Foundation, "Very recent data (late 2007 – 2008) lead us to believe that the fastest-growing segment of the oral cancer population is non-smokers under the age of 50." * However, all risk factors should be considered regardless of age group.

While it may be safe to say that most high-risk oral HPV infections do not cause cancer, oral HPV infections (particularly high-risk) are cause for concern and should be watched closely. Early detection of high-risk oral HPV infections is essential, so notifying your physician or oral health care professional of any change in texture or color of the tongue, mouth or throat, or sores that do not heal, is paramount. Oral HPV is known as a cause for cancers of the mouth and throat areas; the earlier the risk for oral cancer, or oral cancer itself, is detected, the sooner treatment can begin, leading towards a more successful outcome.

* Oral Cancer Foundation: Oral Cancer Facts.
<http://oralcancerfoundation.org/facts/index.htm>