CANCER CARE AND ORAL HEALTH

What’s the Connection?

It is estimated that in the next 25 years the number of people age 65 and older will double, and the largest increase in cancer incidence will occur in those 80 years and older. Aging decreases the body’s ability to protect us from cancer-causing agents in the environment and to repair cells that have been damaged. Detection saves lives. Dental hygienists assess patients’ cancer risk as well as detect cancer by means of head and neck examinations. Screening for cancers of the head and neck, including oral and skin cancer, can be completed at dental hygiene visits.

Risk Factors

- Social habits: Use of tobacco and alcohol
- Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infection
- Exposure to ultraviolet radiation
- Occupational inhalants
- Chronic irritation, such as from rough teeth, filings, or dentures

For more information about cancer and oral health issues and preventive care, ask your registered dental hygienist and visit: www.nydh.org

Oral Complications of Cancer Therapy

- Oral mucositis: Ulcerations of tissues (as well as gastrointestinal tissue) associated with severe pain, infections, and malnutrition
- Xerostomia (dry mouth): Radiation-induced changes to salivary flow and consistency
- Trismus: Limited ability to open and close the mouth from decreased circulation due to radiation therapies
- Candidiasis: Compromised immune system during cancer therapies that can lead to this oral fungal infection
- Dental caries: Decrease in saliva flow and quality, dietary changes increases the risk of cavities (caries). “Radiation Caries” progresses rapidly along the gum line of the teeth
- Oral functional limitations: Impaired ability to eat, taste, swallow or speak due to cancer treatments

Treatment and Management

To minimize the side effects of all types of cancer should be supported by both dental and oncology professionals.

- Oral hygiene: Use soft toothbrush, gently brush at least 2x day, use interdental cleaners to remove plaque biofilm
- Fluoride: Apply fluoride toothpastes, custom made trays for fluoride gels, and/or prescription-strength fluoride toothpastes as instructed
- Mouth rinses: Avoid alcohol, astringents, and antiseptics. Use baking soda, salt, water solution to soothe oral tissues

- Topical oral agents to relieve pain. Avoid chlorhexidine and hydrogen peroxide rinses
- Dry mouth (xerostomia): Increase water and use saliva substitutes, sugar-free candies/gums to stimulate saliva secretions
- Diet: Avoid spicy or acidic foods, tobacco, alcohol
- Dental hygiene recare: Assess for signs of cavities (caries), loss of enamel (demineralization), trismus (restriction in opening the mouth) xerostomia, and other side effects