

**WELLNESS WORKSHEET 95****Performing an Oral Self-Exam**

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Performing regular oral self-exams may help spot early signs of oral cancer. Everyone should also have regular dental appointments that include an oral exam.

**Who Is at Risk for Oral Cancer?**

Key risk factors for oral cancer include tobacco use (any form, including cigarettes and spit tobacco), alcohol use, a past history and head and neck cancer, and exposure of the lips to the sun (without use of a lip balm containing sunscreen). The combination of tobacco use and alcohol use greatly increases the risk for oral cancer. Self-exams may be particularly important for people who use tobacco and/or alcohol.

**Symptoms of Oral Cancer**

The following are common symptoms of oral cancer:

- Patches inside your mouth or on your lips that are white, a mixture of red and white, or red
  - White patches (*leukoplakia*) are the most common. White patches sometimes become malignant.
  - Mixed red and white patches (*erythroleukoplakia*) are more likely than white patches to become malignant.
  - Red patches (*erythroplakia*) are brightly colored, smooth areas that often become malignant.
- A sore on your lip or in your mouth that won't heal
- Any swelling, thickening, lump, bump, or rough or eroded area
- Bleeding in your mouth
- Loose teeth
- Difficulty or pain when swallowing; feeling that something is stuck in the back of the throat
- A change in your bite, or difficulty wearing dentures
- Numbness or tenderness in the mouth, neck, face
- A lump in your neck
- An earache

**Self-Exam**

Thoroughly examine your mouth for the symptoms of oral cancer listed above. Use a light to get a better view. If you are a spit tobacco user, pay special attention to the area where you typically hold tobacco in your mouth.

- Look at your lips from the outside and then pull each one out to examine the inside surfaces. Feel for any lumps or bumps.
- Pull out and back on each of your cheeks and look at the inside surfaces.
- With upper and lower teeth touching, check the gums bordering the outside surfaces of your teeth.
- Open wide and check the inside gum surfaces; use a mirror to view the roof of your mouth and the upper inside gum surfaces.
- Run your finger across your gum surfaces and the inside of your cheeks to check for any bumps or other abnormalities.

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- Stick out your tongue and examine the top; move it from side to side and lift it up in order to view all the surfaces. Feel your tongue for lumps.
- Check your teeth for looseness.
- Finally, feel your neck for any lumps or swellings.

Report any changes to your dentist or physician promptly; she or he can do a professional examination to further evaluate any symptoms. Keep a record of your exams, both self and professional. Note any findings.

Date of exam	Type (self or professional)	Notes

SOURCES: National Cancer Institute. 2004. What You Need to Know About Oral Cancer (<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/oral/page1>; retrieved March 30, 2005); Cleveland Clinic Health Information Center. 2004. *Oral Cancer* (<http://www.clevelandclinic.org/health/health-info/docs/3200/3244.asp?index=11184>; retrieved March 25, 2005); Spit Tobacco Prevention Network. *Oral Cancer Self-Exam* (<http://www.nospit.com/HomeExam.html>; retrieved March 25, 2005).