

# How Your **Sexual History** and Oral Health Are Connected

(NC) The number of cases of head and neck cancers in young, otherwise healthy people is on the rise in Canada. Young people who are non-smokers and non-drinkers are developing cancers of the tonsil and base of the tongue. This growing phenomenon is being attributed to the presence of human papillomavirus in the mouth.



Mistakenly thought only to occur in the genital area, the oral cavity is now known to provide a welcoming environment for the virus to grow. HPV primarily manifests in the back of the mouth in areas such as the base of the tongue, back of the throat and tonsils. Research indicates that the strains HPV-16 and HPV-18 are strongly linked with oral cancer.

The College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario says that an oral cancer screening as part of a routine dental hygiene appointment increases the likelihood that oral cancer will be caught early.

As with any of the cancers, early detection is key. Your dental hygienist will inquire about your medical history and previous malignancies; guide you through a lifestyle risk assessment; do a visual examination of all the soft tissues of the mouth; and feel for abnormalities in the neck, the floor of the mouth, borders of the tongue and lymph nodes surrounding the mouth. Screening aids, including lights and dyes, may also be used to screen for oral cancers.

Any sores or lumps; pain or difficulty swallowing or chewing; change in voice or hoarseness; or feeling of a persistent lump in throat that does not resolve within a two-week period should be considered suspect and worthy of further examination or referral. Dental hygienists are educated to recognize the early signs and symptoms of oral cancer.

Find more information at [www.cdho.org](http://www.cdho.org).