

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Issues Final Recommendation Statement on Screening for Oral Cancer

WASHINGTON, D.C. – November 26, 2013 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today released its final recommendation statement on screening for oral cancer in adults without signs or symptoms of oral cancer who are seen by primary care providers. This recommendation focuses on primary care professionals and is not a recommendation about the practices of specialists, such as dentists and oral health professionals.

Oral cancer, or oral cavity cancer, is a type of head and neck cancer that is found in the mouth and lips. The primary screening test for oral cancer is to look inside and feel a patient's mouth, face, and neck for potentially cancerous lesions, lumps, or other abnormalities. This could be performed by a primary care clinician, dentist, or other dental care professional.

The Task Force found that there is not enough evidence to recommend whether primary care professionals should perform oral cancer screenings on all of their adult patients. Therefore, the Task Force issued an I statement, which means there is not enough evidence to make a definitive recommendation for or against screening.

“The Task Force recognizes that oral cancer is an uncommon but serious disease that can cause grave health problems,” says USPSTF member Jessica Herzstein, M.D., M.P.H. “Even though it is not clear if primary care professionals should screen all adults, patients can reduce their risk of oral cancer by avoiding smoking and other forms of tobacco, limiting their alcohol intake, and getting help from their primary care professional if they need assistance and support in doing so. Additionally, patients with lumps, bumps, or lesions in their mouths or on their lips should have them examined by a health care professional.”

Albert Siu, M.D., M.S.P.H., USPSTF co-vice chair, notes, “We need more research on the effectiveness of oral cancer screening in primary care offices and also on the relationship between oropharyngeal cancer and HPV, ways of preventing HPV infection, and new screening techniques for HPV-related head and neck cancer.”

Screening for oral human papillomavirus (HPV) was not considered for this recommendation. However, the Task Force recognizes that it is a growing risk factor for developing oropharyngeal cancer, a type of head and neck cancer typically found farther in the back of the mouth and throat that may be difficult to visualize in primary care.

The Task Force's final recommendation statement is published online in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, as well as on the Task Force Web site at: www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org. A fact sheet that explains the recommendation statement in plain language is also available. Before finalizing this recommendation, the USPSTF posted a draft version for public comment in the spring of 2013.

The Task Force is an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications.

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