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Oral Cancer Awareness Month - Raising Awareness & Taking Action

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Globally, Oral Cancer Awareness month is observed in April to highlight the significant impact of the disease on individuals and society as a whole. As the leading Indian organization specializing in all things oral health, we recognize the importance of raising awareness about this disease and encourage individuals to take steps to prevent and detect oral cancer. Through education and proactive measures we can work together to reduce the incidence and impact of this devastating disease.



One of the most concerning trends in oral cancer is the rise in the number of cases being diagnosed each year. Globally, oral cancer is the sixth most common type of cancer with India contributing almost one-third of the total burden and the second country having the highest number of oral cancer cases. In India, around 77,000 new cases and 52,000 deaths are reported annually. As compared to the west, the concern of oral cancer is significantly higher here since around 70 per cent of cases are reported in the advanced stages. Because of detection in the late phase, chances of cure are very low, almost negative; leaving five-year survival rates around 20 per cent only. This trend highlights the urgent need for increased awareness and prevention efforts.

There are several common causes of oral cancer including tobacco use, betel-quid chewing, alcohol consumption and human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. These risk factors can increase the likelihood of developing oral cancer and it is important for individuals to be aware of them and take steps to reduce the risk. This can include quitting smoking, reducing alcohol consumption and practicing safe sex to reduce the risk of HPV infection. Detecting cancer in its early stages is crucial in preventing additional physical, psychological and financial harm to the patient. By identifying it early, appropriate treatment can be administered promptly, potentially increasing the patient's survival rate to 90 per cent.

While anyone can develop oral cancer, there are certain populations that are at increased risk. This includes individuals over the age of 45, men and those with a family history of cancer. Additionally, individuals who use tobacco and alcohol as well as those with a weakened immune system, are also at higher risk. The most vulnerable section of the society is underprivileged and lacks access to healthcare services. Many times, these individuals do not have the resources to get the necessary screening and care for oral cancer, making them more susceptible to the disease.

The State of Kerala displays the lowest occurrence of oral cancer, whereas West Bengal records the highest. In the western regions of Maharashtra, oral malignancy is most prevalent in individuals aged 60 years or older, followed by those between 40 and 59 years old, with males being affected twice as frequently as females. An association based on gender has been observed in cases of oral cancer, with males exhibiting a high prevalence of cancer related to tobacco use.

To address these risk factors and promote oral cancer prevention, it is important to prioritize regular screenings and check-ups with a healthcare professional. This can help to detect oral cancer in its early stages when it is most treatable. Additionally, individuals can take steps to reduce the risk by adopting healthy habits such as regular exercise, a balanced diet and good oral hygiene. Early detection is crucial in the successful treatment of oral cancer. It is important to know the signs and symptoms of oral cancer which can include persistent mouth sores, white or red patches in the mouth, difficulty chewing or swallowing, and a persistent sore throat. If any of these symptoms are present, it is important to consult a healthcare professional immediately. Performing self-examination is regarded as one of the most efficient ways to detect oral malignancy at an early stage. Utilizing a visual screening method is a practical approach that can lower the mortality rate and potentially prevent roughly 37,000 deaths caused by oral cancer worldwide.

Additionally, Artificial intelligence (AI) devices using different AI algorithms and techniques can analyse the images of the oral cavity. This can play an important role in detecting pre-cancerous lesions and predict the development of oral cancer which can significantly improve the chances of successful treatment and recovery.

The Government of India has taken several initiatives to address the rise in cases of oral cancer. This includes providing free screening and treatment services for oral cancer as well as launching campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of early detection and prevention. In 2020, India devoted close to Rs.2,386 Cr towards the treatment of oral cancer which was funded through various means including insurance schemes, Government and private sector expenditures, out-of-pocket payments and charitable contributions or a combination thereof. Assuming no inflation in treatment costs, this is anticipated to result in an economic burden of Rs.23,724 Cr on the country over the next decade.

Addressing the burden of oral cancer in India necessitates a focus on prevention, early diagnosis and prompt treatment. Raising public awareness regarding the causes and fatality of oral cancer, the harmful effects of tobacco and alcohol consumption, as well as the significance of maintaining good oral hygiene is crucial. As we observe Oral Cancer Awareness month, let us come together to raise awareness about the disease and take proactive steps to prevent it. By working together, we can make progress in reducing the incidence and impact of oral cancer and ensure that individuals receive the care and support they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives.