

A classic misdiagnosis

Eva Grayzel was diagnosed with oral cancer at age 33 and told she had a 15 per cent chance of survival. Here, she tells her story and introduces her Oral Cancer Awareness Campaign – Six Steps Screening



What Mom puts herself before her kids? I had the sore on my tongue for a month. Everything else seemed more important. Finally, I got to an oral surgeon who did an incisional biopsy. The result was Hyperkeratosis, which I was told was a hardening of the skin, like a callous.

Nothing to be concerned about.

I had no symptoms for two years. Early stage oral cancer is often asymptomatic. You don't feel it, but it can be detected by the trained eye of a dental hygienist or dentist.

The sore returned. I was bounced back and forth between my dentist and oral surgeon for gels, rinses, shaving of the teeth to reduce irritation, even a plastic retainer that protected my tongue from my teeth.

"If it doesn't improve, come back," I was continually being told. Why was I being asked to determine whether my condition was improving? Living with it everyday, the changes were subtle. If my dentist or oral surgeon mentioned oral cancer as a possibility, I think I would have been more proactive as the sore became more painful. After eight months, I developed an unbearable earache and was treated for water on my eardrum. I was waking up throughout the nights in tears.

I returned to the oral surgeon desperate for answers. "Your tongue is small and we don't want to cut it up unless we have to, but at this point, I guess the next step would be another biopsy." For the first time, after nine months of treatment at his office, I thought I should look elsewhere for answers.

A family friend told me to visit a medical center and recommended Dr Mark Urken, chief of Head and Neck Surgery at Mt Sinai Hospital in NYC. I took the bus into NYC that

day not having an inkling that the gross sore on my tongue was cancer. He felt the enlarged lymph nodes in my neck, looked at the classic ulceration on my lateral tongue, and told me he wanted to do a minimally invasive procedure.

In a gentle voice, Dr Urken told me I had a squamous cell carcinoma. Woozy from anesthesia, I asked if it was benign or malignant. With an apologetic tone, he said, "Eva, you are in an advanced stage of oral cancer."

It was April 1st, 1998, the cruelest April Fool's joke of my life. I ate well, exercised, had no risk factors commonly associated with oral cancer. I went into shock.

I had a radical neck dissection and partial glossectomy (tongue reconstruction), with a 15 per cent chance of survival. I was one of the lucky few.

Many times I asked myself, "Why me?" A friend gave me an answer: "Why not you?" Now, I tell my story professionally. It is more than a mission to educate, but a tribute to those that came before me and an obligation to those that will follow.

I began a grassroots awareness campaign called the Sextet Six-Step Screening to educate the general public about a thorough oral cancer screening. For this, I was recognized by the American Academy of Oral Medicine and given honorary membership. Find out more at

www.SixStepScreening.org

The Sextet Six-Step Screening: The standard of care
Early stage oral cancer is asymptomatic. You do not feel it or see it easily. It can only be detected with a trained eye. If you are not getting a thorough screening, ask for it!

1. Tongue 'n Gauze
2. Neck Caress
3. Lip & Cheek Roll
4. Palate Tickle
5. Double Digit Probe
6. Tonsil Abhhhh

"If oral cancer can happen to me, it can happen to anyone."
Eva Grayzel - non-smoker, diagnosed at age 33

www.SixStepScreening.org

- * Oral cancer is very curable with early detection.
- * 34,000 oral cancer cases in US diagnosed each year.
- * Dentist/hygienist examines for irregularities: lesion, red/white patch, asymmetry.
- * Screening devices exist: Brush Test, ELIScope™, VisiLite™... ask about them.
- * When you call for an appointment, ask when they last had Continuing Education in early detection.
- * You are the best advocate for your healthcare.