

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Issues Draft Recommendation Statement: Screening for Oral Cancer

WASHINGTON, D.C. – April 9, 2013 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today posted a final evidence report and draft recommendation statement on screening for oral cancer. The Task Force is providing an opportunity for public comment on this draft recommendation statement until May 6. All public comments will be considered as the Task Force develops its final recommendation.

Oral cancer is an uncommon but serious disease that can cause grave health problems for those affected. Tobacco and alcohol use are major risk factors for developing oral cancer. In addition, oral human papillomavirus (HPV) is a growing risk factor for developing oropharyngeal cancer, a type of oral cancer.

The Task Force found that there is not enough evidence to recommend whether or not primary care professionals should perform oral cancer screenings on all of their adult patients. Therefore, the Task Force has issued a draft I recommendation statement, which means that there is not enough evidence to make a definitive recommendation. This draft recommendation statement applies to people who do not have any signs or symptoms of oral cancer. This recommendation focuses on primary care professionals screening for oral cancer. It is not a recommendation about the practices of dentists and oral health professionals.

“The evidence shows that it is difficult to detect oral cancer and that the evidence is not clear whether oral cancer screening improves long-term health outcomes among the general adult population or among high-risk groups,” stated Task Force member Jessica Herzstein, M.D., M.P.H. “We need more high-quality research on whether screening tests can accurately detect oral cancer and if screening adults for oral cancer in primary care settings improves health outcomes.”

It is important to note that an I statement is not a recommendation for or against screening. It means that there is not enough evidence to say definitively whether screening results in more benefit than harm. In the absence of clear evidence, a health care professional should consider a number of things when providing guidance to patients, including current scientific research, expert opinion, professional knowledge and experience, as well as the health histories, values, and preferences of patients and their families.

The Task Force’s draft recommendation statement is available for public comment on the Task Force Web site at <http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/tfcomment.htm>.

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.

Contact: Ana Fullmer at Newsroom@USPSTF.net / (202) 350-6668

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