

Your Dentist is Watching your Skin

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Let's play a quick game: Who is more likely to detect skin cancer?

- A. Your primary care physician
- B. A dermatologist
- C. The dentist.

Go ahead, take a guess. If you guessed, "the dentist," you'd be right! The reason for this is because most people only ever see their physician once a year (maybe) or a dermatologist if they were referred to one. On the other hand, the average patient visits their dentist every three to six months.

In a routine dental visit, the dentist does a whole lot more than just check for cavities or ask the dreaded "have you been flossing?" question. He or she is actually searching for anything out of the ordinary, including possible evidence of skin cancer.

As part of every comprehensive exam (new patient exam) and even most periodic or recare exams (hygiene check), a dentist will perform the following series of examinations: an intraoral/periodontal exam, an oral cancer screening and an extraoral exam.

The intraoral exam involves carefully examining the teeth, gums, tongue, airway, hard/soft palate and various other oral structures. While looking around, they are simultaneously doing what we in the biz call an OCS, oral cancer screening. The dentist will check for lumps, bumps, sores, and discolorations that could be indicative of a potential disease or disorder.

Likewise, they will do the same thing outside of the mouth during the extraoral exam, palpating the lymph nodes and jaw muscles, checking the TMJ (temporomandibular joint) for any popping or clicking and examining the skin and soft tissue.

They may or may not voice this is what they're doing. You may have thought they were just having a casual conversation with their fingers in your mouth, but rest assured, if your dentist finds anything unusual during this process, they will absolutely let you know and possibly recommend a follow-up.

They might want to check again themselves in a few weeks to see if there's been any changes, or they may recommend a consult or biopsy. They will refer you to the proper health care professional.

If you are unsure if your dentist is doing any of these things at your next cleaning, just ask. Most will be more than happy to explain their process as well as their findings with you along the way.

