



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**April is Oral Cancer Awareness Month**

*Regular dental exams are important for oral cancer detection*

**NAPERVILLE, Ill. – March 26, 2018** – While most people are aware that tobacco can cause cancer, many are unaware it's a leading risk factor for oral cancer. April is Oral Cancer Awareness Month, and Delta Dental of Illinois wants to educate Illinoisans about the lifestyle-related risk factors of the disease and the importance of visiting the dentist regularly for early detection.

"Oral cancer is typically discovered late in its development, making the fatality rate higher than other forms of cancer," said Dr. Sheila Strock, vice president, dental services and science officer at Delta Dental of Illinois. "Seeing the dentist is an important precautionary step for early oral cancer detection, especially since people typically visit their dentist more often than their physician. Early detection is key, improving the survival rate from 57 percent to 81 percent."

More than one-third (35 percent) of Illinois adults say they visit the dentist less than once a year, according to the 2018 Delta Dental of Illinois Adult Oral Health & Well-Being Survey.<sup>1</sup> Delta Dental of Illinois is educating the public to improve this percentage.

According to the Illinois State Cancer Registry, each year nearly 1,500 people in Illinois are diagnosed with oral cancer, which is defined as any type of cancer in the back of the throat or mouth. Symptoms to watch for include: irritation, soreness or swelling in the jaw or throat; red or white patches in the mouth; and difficulty chewing, swallowing or speaking.

"It may be surprising, but the sexually transmitted disease human papillomavirus (HPV) is becoming one of the leading causes of oral cancer," said Dr. Strock. "HPV affects tissue growth that may lead to oral cancer. Many physicians recommend vaccinations at age 11 or 12 to prevent HPV and cancers related to the virus. The vaccine isn't effective after being exposed to HPV."

Coined a "lifestyle disease," there are many ways to reduce the risk of getting oral cancer, including:

- **Don't use tobacco.** It's important to quit all forms of tobacco including cigarettes and chewing tobacco.
- **Abstain from heavy drinking.** Limit alcohol to one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men.

- **Always use SPF lip balm.** Just as sunscreen is important to protect skin from the sun, lips need shielded with an SPF.
- **Maintain a healthy diet.** Eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, vitamin C, calcium and antioxidants may help lower risk.

“It’s important to keep in mind that 1 in 4 people diagnosed with oral cancer have no risk factors,” said Dr. Strock. “So don’t think that if you live an extremely healthy lifestyle, you can skip dental visits. Regular screenings are important for everyone, along with routine tooth brushing and flossing.”

#### **About Delta Dental of Illinois**

*Delta Dental of Illinois is a not-for-profit dental service corporation that provides dental benefit programs to individuals and more than 6,000 employee groups throughout Illinois. Delta Dental of Illinois covers 2 million individuals, employees and family members nationwide. Delta Dental of Illinois is based in Naperville, Illinois and offers single-site administration and client services.*

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<sup>1</sup>*Kelton, a leading global insights firm, conducted the 2018 Delta Dental of Illinois Adult Oral Health & Well-Being Survey. Interviews were conducted statewide via email with 305 Illinois adults ages 18+. For results based on the total sample of Illinois adults, the margin of error is +/- 5.6% at a 95 percent confidence level.*