

AWARENESS ABOUT ORAL CANCER AMONG NON MEDICAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF PESHAWAR

¹BUSHRA MEHBOOB, BDS (Pesh)

²EHTESHAM KHAN, BDS (Pesh)

³MUSLIM KHAN, BDS, (LUMHS) Sindh), FCPS (Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery)

ABSTRACT

The objective of the study was to determine the awareness level of university students, their attitude and habits of tobacco use amongst them.

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from a random sample of 236 students from 5 non-medical universities of Peshawar. The questionnaire included 12 questions pertaining to knowledge about oral cancer, its causative factors, key symptoms and habits of snuff dipping and smoking.

In this study 64% students were males and 36% were females. Only 3% of students were familiar with the word oral cancer, 45% of students were aware that cigarette can cause oral cancer while 22% stated niswar as cause of oral cancer. 58% of students had no idea about signs of oral cancer. With regards to dental attendance 89% students said that they will visit a dentist when in trouble. 7% were in habit of snuff dipping and 19% were found to be smokers.

This study revealed that the student population was unaware about oral cancer especially about its signs.

Key words: Oral cancer, University students, Awareness

INTRODUCTION

Oral cancer is the 6th most commonly reported malignancy worldwide.¹ Although many types of cancers occur in oral cavity, about 90% of these are squamous cell carcinomas.² Out of the many factors associated with oral cancer, tobacco use has been identified as the strongest.³

Oral cancer is becoming a major health problem because of the recent rise in its incidence especially in underdeveloped countries. According to worldwide statistics an estimated 263,900 new cases were found with 128,000 deaths annually worldwide.⁴ About 58 percent cases of oral cancer occur in South and South East Asia.⁵ Likewise the condition in Pakistan is far worse, according to statistics by WHO (GLOBOCAN 2008) over all oral cancer is 2nd most common cancer in Pakistan with 101.6 thousand deaths occurring annually.⁶ In spite of the increased mortality and morbidity

oral cancer remains largely preventable.⁷ Thus awareness from signs of oral cancer and knowledge about its causative factors is very important as majority of the public still remains unaware of basic knowledge about oral cancer.⁸

METHODOLOGY

The present survey was carried out from 1st to 30th March, 2011 in three non medical universities of Peshawar. The study population included students ranging from 19 to 25 years of age who had no background knowledge of medicine and were not related to any branch of medical sciences. A total of 236 students were randomly selected in this study.

The information was gathered by asking queries using a well structured questionnaire covering aspects regarding knowledge about oral cancer, dental attitude and habits of snuff dipping and smoking. The question-

^{1,2} House Surgeons, Khyber College of Dentistry, Peshawar

³ Assistant Professor, Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, Khyber College of Dentistry, Peshawar

For Correspondence: Dr Bushra Mehboob, House 18, Street, 5 Rahat Abad, Post Office Forest College, Peshawar e-mail: bushesmmm@hotmail.com

naire was explained to the students completely prior to handing it out to them. Study protocol and the use of data for research was fully explained to the students to get fully informed and understood consent. The data collected was analyzed by using Microsoft Excel 2007 edition.

RESULTS

Out of 236 students questioned, 64% were males and 36% were females. In response to type of cancer most commonly heard of, 49% of university students were familiar with “lung cancer”, 34% skin cancer and 4% cervical cancer while only 3% knew the word “oral cancer.” (Figure 1). When asked about risk factors for oral cancer, 45% students answered cigarette smoking, 22% snuff dipping, 11% dental fillings, 8% pollution, while 4% identified drinking to be linked with oral cancer (Figure 2). 43% of students thought smokers are more likely to develop oral cancer. When asked about signs of oral cancer 58% had no idea about it, 17% thought lump, 16% color change in oral mucosa while according to 9% an ulcer could be the early sign of oral cancer (Figure 3). Regarding dental attitude and attendance 89% of students would visit a dentist only when

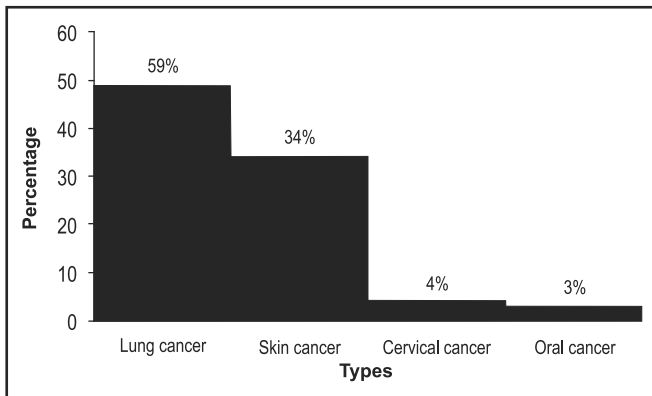


Fig 1: Types of cancer students had heard

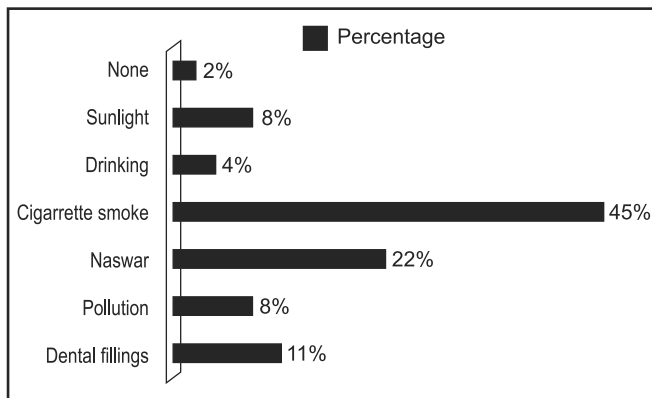


Fig 2: Possible risk factors considered for oral cancer by the students

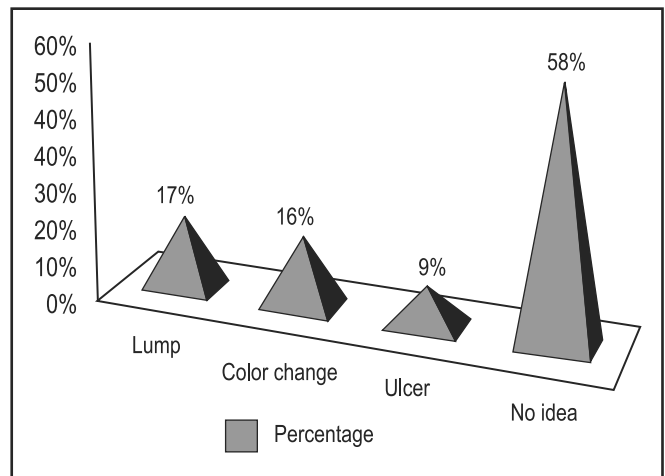


Fig 3: Various signs of oral cancer perceived by the students

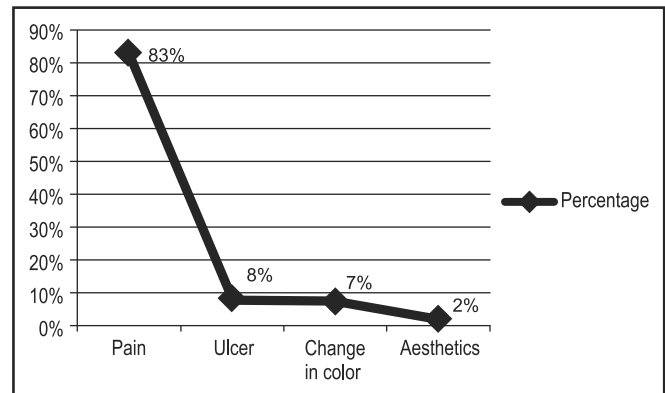


Fig 4: Reasons for making dental visits

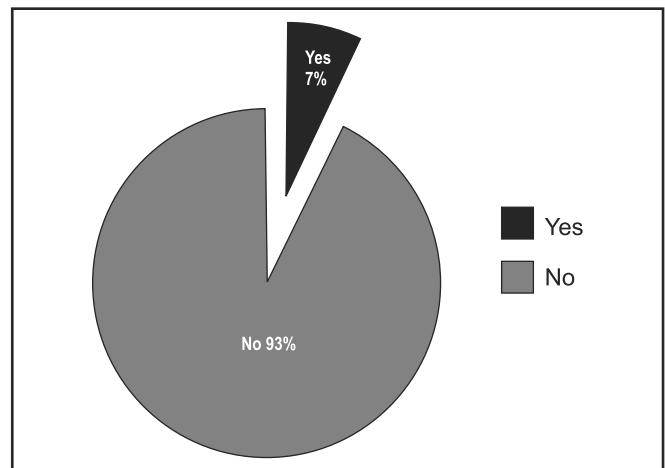


Fig 5: Use of niswar (Chewing Tobacco)

in trouble and 83% of students stated pain as the main reason for dental visit (Figure 4). Alarming 7% of students were in the habit of snuff dipping (Figure 5) and 70% of these used snuff for 10-20 minutes, 20% for half an hour, and 10% used it for one hour daily (Figure 6). 19% students were cigarette smokers.

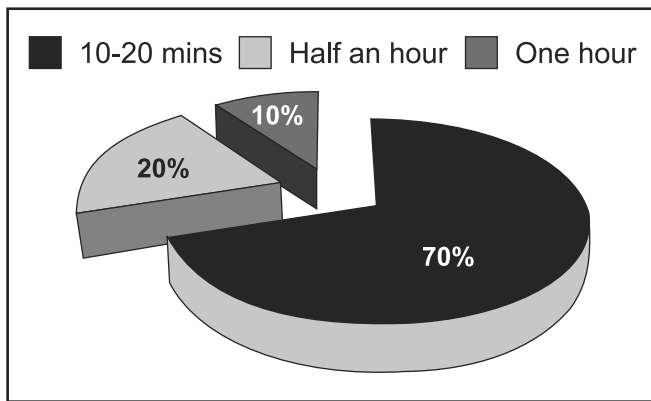


Fig 6: Duration of Niswar use

DISCUSSION

Oral cancer awareness is an important but often neglected topic. Probably this survey is the first of its kind that was carried out among non-medical university students of Peshawar.

In this study it was found that only 3% of students had heard about oral cancer, while 4% were familiar with cervical cancer. This is in agreement with studies done by Warnakulasuriya⁹ and Rogers¹⁰ where less number of people were aware with the term oral cancer. However, in another survey done in Britain in 2006 during oral cancer awareness week there was an improvement in people's knowledge about oral cancer, may be due to increased media attention given to oral cancer during awareness week.¹¹

With regards to knowledge about risk factors of oral cancer, it was found that some students had wrong information. Although 67% of students identified smoking and snuff dipping to be associated with oral cancer there were also 11% who thought dental fillings caused oral cancer, while 8% thought old age is more likely the cause of oral cancer. This is in accordance with a study done in USA where 67% of adults could identify tobacco use to be linked with oral cancer.¹² Similarly in a study done in UK 90% of respondents thought smoking caused oral cancer.¹³ Also in a study carried out in Germany more than half of responders could identify link between oral cancer and tobacco.¹⁴ This may be due to the fact that this study was carried out among educated population and as such most of them were aware of tobacco as to be a cause of oral cancer. Results of the present study are in disagreement with studies done in Iran¹⁵ and Srilanka¹⁶ where less number of people were aware of risk factors for oral cancer. This may be due to the fact that these studies were carried out among patients in hospital setting.

Students had wrong thinking about key signs of oral cancer. Large number of students (58%) had no idea about oral cancer while only 9% thought an ulcer

could be indicative of it. These results are in accordance with study done in Florida where one half of adult population did not think red patches or bleeding could indicate oral cancer.¹⁷ However, the results are contradictory to studies carried out in North Carolina¹⁸ and Turkey¹⁹ where majority of population were aware of signs of oral cancer. Similarly in a study done in UK on an average only 13% of population were unaware of oral cancer signs.²⁰ Reason may be due to the fact that organizational efforts and policies on government level are active in the West due to which an increased level of awareness especially regarding signs is seen. This is an important observation since lack of self-detection by the patient particularly in early stages of disease leads to delay in diagnosis thus increasing the mortality and morbidity rates.²¹

When students were asked about dental attendance 89% of students answered that they would visit dentist only when in trouble. Furthermore 83% of students stated pain as the main reason for dental visit while only 8% would go to a dentist when they have an ulcer. This is in accordance with the study done in Saudi Arabia where pain was stated as main reason for dental visits.²² Similarly in a study done in India it was found that knowledge and behavior scores for oral health were lower among students and this in turn had a significant relationship to periodontal problems and dental caries status.²³ This may be due to the fact that knowledge regarding proper oral health and the need for oral examination is lacking in their population. This also is a negative reflection on the part of dentists highlighting the importance of personal and professional behavior.²⁴ This is a significant observation since it shows that even the educated population of this region is unaware of the importance of regular dental examination. This point was also highlighted in a study done in USA where it was found that less than one third of adult population has had a proper cancer examination in the past.²⁵

It was found in this study that 7% of the educated population were in the habit of snuff dipping and 70% of these snuff dippers used it for 10-20 minutes daily. Also 19% of students were found to be smokers. It is a well-known fact that use of smokeless tobacco (ST) is wide spread in West and especially in South Asians countries like Pakistan and India.²⁶ The association between snuff and oral cancer is also evident from many studies.²⁷ These results are comparable to the study done in USA where it was found that 7% of high school students were current users of ST²⁸, also studies have revealed that the use of ST among teen age and young adults has increased in the past two decades.²⁹ Similar results were obtained in other countries like India³⁰ and Lebanon.³¹ Similarly the high prevalence of

Tobacco use and its association with oral cancer has been shown in many studies done in Pakistan.^{32,33} According to a study done in Karachi it was found that 16.1% of high school students were in habit of using smokeless tobacco.³⁴ According to another study 52.4% of people in Karachi used ST and majority of them started using it before the age of 15 years.³⁵ These results show clearly the poor awareness conditions regarding use of Tobacco and oral cancer.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that even the educated population of this region is unaware of basic knowledge about oral cancer especially about its signs and symptoms. The use of tobacco among students was found to be high.

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