Tongue Cancer

My neighbor was recently diagnosed with a tongue cancer. How common is that, and what can I do to prevent it?

Tongue cancer is placed together with mouth cancers, and is the sixth most common cancer in the world. In the United States, about 8,000 people die annually from it.

Mouth cancer is largely a preventable disease, because the principle factors are smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and excessive sunshine (lip cancer).

Men are more often affected than women. Smokers are six times more likely to get mouth cancers, while those chewing tobacco have a 50-fold increase in risk. Using tobacco and alcohol together increases the risk more than either alone.

Avoidance of these aggravating factors is, of course, most important. So is being aware of changes in the lips, palate, tongue, gums and cheeks. Careful checking with the fingers and a good look at the mouth in the mirror can be helpful. Do not neglect lesions that bleed, or are red or white. Lumps, ulcers and thickenings must be checked. Regular visits to a good dentist will screen for mouth cancers.

When mouth cancer is detected early, treatment is much more successful than when it has spread to the lymph nodes.