Scientists warn dental x-rays increase cancer risk

Dental x-rays can increase the risk of thyroid cancer, according to scientists in a new study

A research team from Brighton and Cambridge and Kuwait studied 513 thyroid cancer patients in Kuwait where the numbers of thyroid cancer are relatively high compared with Britain.

The researchers asked the cancer patients and a similar number of healthy volunteers how many dental x-rays they had had. After factoring in hospital x-rays, they found that men and women who had had up to four dental x-rays were more than twice as likely to have developed the disease than those who had never had any. Between five and nine x-rays and their risk rose more than four-fold.

However, the researchers warned that the results of their study ‘should be treated with caution’ because the data was based on self-reporting by the participants as comprehensive historical dental x-ray records were not available from the clinics. The researchers are now calling for further investigation as currently guidelines state that low-dose radiation exposure through dental radiography is safe.

Professor Damien Walmsley, Scientific Adviser to the BDA, called it an ‘interesting study’ but said: “As the authors acknowledge, this is an area that requires further research.

‘That work should be based on larger studies of subjects for whom better historical dental x-ray records are available if firmer conclusions are to be drawn from it.’

‘Dentists here consider the necessity of x-raying patients on a case-by-case basis, employing dose-reduction techniques on cancer, further research is required. The study was published in the medical journal Acta Oncologica.”

Dental x-rays can increase the risk of thyroid cancer

The incidence rates of thyroid cancer have doubled from 1.4 per 100,000 in 1975 to 2.9 per 100,000 in 2006 in the UK. The team has linked this to more and more patients having dental x-rays.

However, the researchers say that many other factors can also be causing the increase in thyroid cancer cases. The sensitive diagnostic techniques cannot solely be blamed. To confirm the exact effect of such techniques on cancer, further research is required. The study was published in the medical journal Acta Oncologica.  

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