

Head and Neck Cancers

Head and neck cancers occur when cancerous cells develop in the head and neck area, including the mouth, throat, and nasal cavity. Usually, cancers of the head and neck begin in the moist lining of mucosal surfaces. Head and neck cancers are identified in the following areas:

- **Oral Cavity:** Comprised of the lips, the inside layer of the lips and cheeks, the front portion of the tongue, the areas above and below the tongue, the gums, the hard palate, and the space behind the wisdom teeth.
- **Nasal Cavity:** Includes the hollow area within the nose.
- **Paranasal Sinuses:** Includes the open spaces within the bones around the nose.
- **Lymph Nodes:** Enlarged lymph nodes in the neck area can sometimes be the first sign of head and neck cancers.
- **Larynx:** Known as the “voice box,” the larynx is the passageway that aids in breathing, swallowing, and speaking.
- **Pharynx:** The pharynx is the tube that connects the nose to the trachea and esophagus. It has three parts: nasopharynx (behind the nose), oropharynx (middle of the pharynx, including soft palate, tonsils, and base of tongue), and hypopharynx (bottom of the pharynx).
- **Salivary Glands:** These are the saliva-producing glands in the bottom of the mouth and near the jawbone.

Statistics

- While statistics are not available for all head and neck cancer types, in 2021, **54,010 diagnoses** of oral cavity/oropharyngeal cancer and **12,620** of laryngeal cancer, with **10,850** and **3,770 deaths** respectively, are expected.
- In Texas in 2021, **3,592 people** are expected to be diagnosed with oral cavity/pharynx cancer and **959** with larynx cancer, resulting in an expected **788 deaths** and **292 deaths**, respectively.
- Head and neck cancers comprise about **4 percent** of U.S. cancer cases and develop more frequently in men than women.
- At least **75 percent** of cases of head and neck cancers are associated with the use of tobacco and alcohol.

Risk Factors

- **Age:** Adults over the age of 40 are more likely to face a head and neck cancer diagnosis.
- **Gender:** Men are at least twice as likely to develop head and neck cancers as women, although over the last several decades the incidence in women has been increasing.
- **HPV Infection:** The human papillomavirus (HPV) increases risk for some forms of head and neck cancers and is linked to about two-thirds of oropharyngeal cancers.
- **Radiation:** Exposure to the head and neck from radiation treatment can increase risk.
- **Tobacco:** Tobacco use increases risk for all head and neck cancers, especially oral cavity, hypopharynx, oropharynx, and larynx. Tobacco use has been linked to around 85% of head and neck cancer cases.
- **Alcohol:** Those who consume alcohol face a greater risk of head and neck cancers.
- **Epstein-Barr Virus Infection:** Epstein-Barr virus infection increases risk of nasopharyngeal and salivary gland cancer.
- **Health Conditions:** Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), laryngopharyngeal reflux disease (LPRD), graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), compromised immune systems, fanconi anemia, dyskeratosis congenita, and lichen planus may also increase the risk of head and neck cancers.
- **Lifestyle Factors:** Occupational exposure to wood dust, asbestos, paint fumes, and formaldehyde; poor oral health; poor nutrition; prolonged sun exposure; marijuana use; and consumption of paan, gutka, and certain preserved or salted foods is associated with head and neck cancer.

Symptoms

It is important to consult a physician if any of the following symptoms are experienced on a persistent basis.

- Swelling of the jaw, eyes, or chin
- Ringing of ears
- Persistent headaches
- Change in voice or hoarseness
- Pain in the throat, mouth, ear, face, upper teeth, chin, jaw, or neck area
- Chronic sore throat or blocked sinuses
- White or red patch in mouth
- Face muscle numbness or paralysis
- Ear infection or sinus infections resistant to treatment
- Trouble swallowing, chewing, moving jaw or tongue, hearing, breathing, speaking, ill-fitting dentures or loose teeth
- Bleeding of the mouth or nose
- Lumps, bumps, or masses in the head and neck area
- Double vision
- Nasal discharge, obstruction, or persistent congestion
- Unexplained weight loss
- Foul breath
- Fatigue

Treatment Options

Treatment options vary depending on how advanced the cancer is and if it has spread to other parts of the body. Physicians will determine the most appropriate treatment options for each patient, including surgery, radiation therapy, proton therapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, chemotherapy, and palliative care. A combination may be used for the best chance of disease control.

About Texas Oncology

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