

Head and Neck Cancer: Symptoms and Treatment Options



While often referred to as **head and neck cancer**, the term itself isn't a diagnosis. Instead, head and neck cancer indicates the area of the body where the cancer originated, most commonly in the mouth, throat, sinuses, or salivary glands, but does not include cancer of the brain or eyes. The good news is that head and neck cancers are often treatable when caught early, and most are preventable.

What is Head and Neck Cancer?

Head and neck cancer refers to a variety of cancers that can develop in the throat, nose, mouth, sinuses, or larynx. Some head and neck cancers include:

- **Laryngeal and Hypopharyngeal Cancer:** Laryngeal cancer starts in the larynx, also known as the voice box. Hypopharyngeal cancer starts in the lower throat.
- **Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancer:** Cancers in the oral cavity occur in the mouth and tongue. Oropharyngeal cancer starts in the middle part of the throat.
- **Nasopharyngeal Cancer:** Nasopharyngeal cancer starts in the upper part of the throat, behind the nose.
- **Nasal Cavity and Paranasal Sinuses Cancer:** Nasal cavity cancer starts in the nasal cavity, the opening behind the nose. Paranasal sinus cancer starts in the sinuses.
- **Salivary Gland Cancer:** Salivary gland cancer starts in the glands that produce saliva, which are located inside and near the mouth.

Symptoms of Head and Neck Cancer

Since head and neck cancers vary in location and type, there can be multiple symptoms and risk factors. However, some common symptoms may include:

1. A lump in the neck that can be felt, but often is not painful
2. Face, lip, or neck sores that won't heal
3. Voice changes
4. A lump, thickening, or mass in the cheeks

5. Pain or difficulty swallowing or moving tongue and jaw
6. Nosebleeds
7. Stuffy nose that doesn't go away
8. Ear pain

Keep in mind these symptoms may also be caused by other, less serious conditions. You should speak to your doctor or dentist if you develop these symptoms or have any concerns about head and neck cancer.

Causes of Head and Neck Cancer

Alcohol and tobacco are major risk factors for cancers of the head and neck. In addition, nearly 70% of cancers in the oropharynx are linked to human papillomavirus (HPV). Almost twice as many men than women get head and neck cancers, and most individuals diagnosed are over 50 years of age.

“Not all head and neck cancers can be prevented,” said [Dr. Chao Yin, MD](#), medical oncologist at Virginia Cancer Specialists. “However, we know there are risk factors, and in many cases, we can take steps to reduce that risk.”

Risk Factors

Alcohol and Tobacco Use

Two important risk factors for head and neck cancers are alcohol and tobacco use. This includes exposure to secondhand smoke and the use of smokeless or chewing tobacco. These risk factors are most often linked to cancers in the oral cavity, hypopharynx, and the voice box. People who use both tobacco and alcohol have a greater risk of developing head and neck cancers than those who drink alcohol or use tobacco alone.

Cutting back or eliminating consumption of alcohol and tobacco products, or limiting secondhand tobacco exposure, may reduce cancer risk.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

HPV has been linked to oropharyngeal cancers, which are cancers found in the back of the throat, base of the tongue, and the tonsils. HPV may cause up to 70% of oropharyngeal cancer cases in the United States. HPV has not been linked to other head and neck cancers.

The HPV vaccine protects against the types of HPV known to cause oropharyngeal cancers.

Epstein-Barr, Radiation, and Other Contributing Factors

Head and neck cancers may also be caused by other factors like Epstein-Barr virus infection or radiation treatment. Genetics and ancestry can also play a role in whether you develop these cancers. In addition, exposure to UV rays and occupational exposure may increase your risk.

Treatment Options for Head and Neck Cancer

Head and neck cancer treatment is done to either remove the disease or control its growth. Available treatment options depend on the type and location of the cancer.

“To achieve the best results,” said Dr. Yin, “patients require a personalized treatment plan that takes into account their stage of cancer, age, and overall health. In addition, we try to preserve the function of the area as much as possible so that patients can return to normal activities.”

Available treatment options for head and neck cancers may include:

1. Surgery to remove the tumor and adjacent areas
2. Radiation therapy
3. Chemotherapy
4. Targeted therapies to treat specific characteristics of cancer cells
5. Immunotherapy
6. A combination of the above treatments

In addition, a treatment plan may include reconstructive surgery or prosthesis to help restore or improve the ability to swallow, speak, or regain appearance.

How Virginia Cancer Specialists Can Help

It's important to understand the risk factors and symptoms of head and neck cancer and take note of any concerning changes to discuss with your doctor. If you have been diagnosed with a head and neck cancer, the team at Virginia Cancer Specialists will work with you to create a personalized treatment plan and provide ongoing support.

For more information, or to schedule an appointment, visit our [website](#) or call 571-350-8400.

About Virginia Cancer Specialists

[Virginia Cancer Specialists \(VCS\)](#) is the largest comprehensive private cancer practice in Northern Virginia, featuring a world-class treatment team committed to fighting cancer and diseases of the blood. VCS provides patients access to leading-edge treatment protocols, clinical trials, and comprehensive care, along with a multidisciplinary approach to medical oncology, radiation oncology, musculoskeletal tumor surgery, breast surgery, and thoracic surgery. They also offer genetic counseling, palliative care, oncology nurse navigators, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, oncology infusion nurses, oncology pharmacists, social workers, dietitians, and laboratory technicians.