

# Head and neck cancers

If cancer of the head and neck is found and treated early, you have a good chance of getting better.

## What is head and neck cancer?

Cancer can develop in any of the tissues or organs in the head and neck. This means cancer can develop in the mouth, voice box, sinuses, nose, lips, and salivary glands down through the throat.

Head and neck cancer is a general term that doctors use. It covers many different types of cancer. Although these cancers are different, they are treated similarly, so are often grouped together.

Head and neck cancers can be described by the area where they started. They are also described according to the type of cell the cancer started in.

## How will I know I have head and neck cancer?

Common signs include:

- an ulcer in the mouth that doesn't heal within a few weeks
- red or white patches in the mouth that don't go away within a few weeks
- difficulty swallowing or pain when chewing or swallowing
- changes to your voice like sounding hoarse
- a constant sore throat and earache on one side
- a swelling or lump in the face, mouth or neck.

To check these signs for cancer, you may have several tests. Often this will include an ultrasound or a thin tube with a light at the end will be used to look at the back of your mouth and throat.

One of the most important tests for diagnosing cancer is a biopsy. This means taking a sample of cells from the area that looks abnormal.

These tests can feel uncomfortable, but they only take a few minutes.

## HEAD AND NECK CANCERS

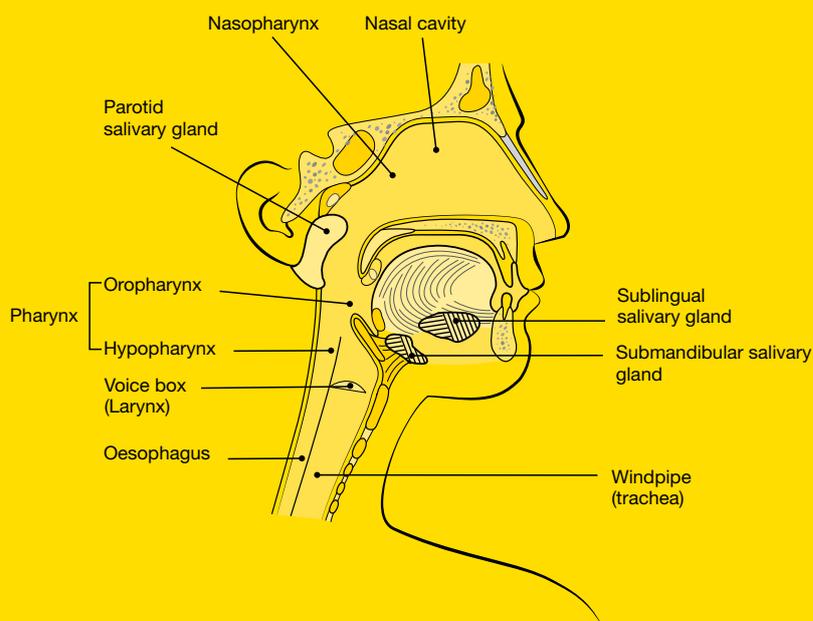
### What do the test results mean?

The test results will tell the doctor what type of head and neck cancer you have and if the cancer has spread (the stage). This information helps the doctors decide what treatment you need.

**Stage I** – the cancer is small, localised and usually curable

**Stage II and III** – the cancer is locally advanced and/or has spread to local lymph nodes

**Stage IV** – the cancer has spread to distant parts of the body.



**Mouth or oral cancer** – starts anywhere in the mouth, including the lips, inside the cheeks, the front two-thirds of the tongue, floor of the mouth, jaw and the gums.

**Pharyngeal cancer** – starts in parts of the throat (pharynx): nasopharyngeal, oropharyngeal and hypopharyngeal.

**Salivary gland cancer** – starts in the glands in front of the ears

(parotid glands), beneath the jaw (submandibular glands) or tongue (sublingual glands).

**Laryngeal cancer** – starts in the voice box (larynx).

**Nasal cancer or paranasal sinus cancer** – starts in the nose, nasal cavity or the sinuses.

**HEAD AND NECK CANCERS**

**What treatment will I need?**

There are different types of treatment for head and neck cancer. You may have one or more of these treatments.

- **Surgery** – removes the lump or cancer, if possible
  - Ask your doctor if the surgery might change the way you talk, eat, breath or the way you look.
  - Surgery may also remove lymph nodes that the cancer may have spread to.
- **Chemotherapy** – uses drugs to kill or damage the cancer cells
  - Used for more advanced cancer and for symptom relief with advanced disease.
- **Radiotherapy** – uses radiation to kill or damage the cancer cells
  - May be used after surgery if the cancer has spread.
  - Used for symptom relief with advanced cancer.

**How will the treatment affect my body?**

Treatment for head and neck cancer can cause problems. Some of the common ones include:

- Redness at the radiotherapy site
- Sores in your mouth
- A dry mouth or thick spit (saliva)
- Difficulty in swallowing
- Changes in taste
- Nausea

**How do I manage my cancer?**

It is normal for you and your family to have lots of different feelings right now. Talking with your doctor, nurse or health care professional will help answer any questions you may have.

Depending on where you live, you might need to travel for treatment. You can get help to pay for travel and accommodation.

**For more information**

- Call Cancer Council 13 11 20
- Visit [www.cancerCouncil.com.au](http://www.cancerCouncil.com.au)
- Visit [www.menzies.edu.au/cancer](http://www.menzies.edu.au/cancer)
- For current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cancer-related statistics, see [www.aihw.gov.au](http://www.aihw.gov.au)

*This information has been adapted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by Menzies School of Health Research in consultation with a Clinical Advisory Group and an Indigenous Consultation group. Production by Cancer Council.*