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Head and Neck Cancer

What is head and neck cancer?

Head and neck cancer is the name for cancers that develop in the mouth [<https://medlineplus.gov/oralcancer.html>] , nose and sinuses [<https://medlineplus.gov/nasalcancer.html>] , salivary glands [<https://medlineplus.gov/salivaryglandcancer.html>] , and throat and voice box [<https://medlineplus.gov/throatcancer.html>] (larynx). Most head and neck cancers are **squamous cell cancers**. They begin in the moist tissues that line the head and neck. The cancer cells may spread into deeper tissue as the cancer grows.

There are other cancers that develop in the head and neck, such as brain cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/braintumors.html>] , eye cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/eyecancer.html>] , and esophageal cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/esophagealcancer.html>] . But they are usually not considered to be head and neck cancers, because those types of cancer and their treatments are different.

Who is more likely to develop head and neck cancer?

Anyone can get head and neck cancer, but you are more likely to develop it if you:

- Use tobacco or drink lots of alcohol. Your risk of developing head and neck cancer is even higher if you do both.
- Are male.
- Are over age 50.
- Have a history of head or neck cancer.
- Have HPV [<https://medlineplus.gov/hpv.html>] (for cancers in the tonsils and base of the tongue).
- Are exposed to wood dusts or certain other toxic substances at work [<https://medlineplus.gov/occupationalhealth.html>] (for upper throat, nose, and sinus cancers).
- Have had radiation exposure [<https://medlineplus.gov/radiationexposure.html>] to the head and neck (for salivary gland cancer).
- Have Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) infection (for upper throat and salivary gland cancers).
- Are Asian (for upper throat cancer).

What are the symptoms of head and neck cancer?

The symptoms of head and neck cancer may include:

- A lump in the neck
- A sore in the mouth or the throat that does not heal and may be painful
- A sore throat [<https://medlineplus.gov/sorethroat.html>] that does not go away
- Trouble swallowing [<https://medlineplus.gov/swallowingdisorders.html>]
- A change or hoarseness in the voice

Other possible symptoms can depend on the specific type of head and neck cancer.

How is head and neck cancer diagnosed?

Which exams and tests used to diagnose head and neck cancer can depend on the specific type of cancer. Possible exams and tests may include:

- A physical exam of the area that might have cancer.
- Blood and/or urine tests.
- An endoscopy [<https://medlineplus.gov/endoscopy.html>] .
- A biopsy [<https://medlineplus.gov/biopsy.html>] or other procedure to collect cells from the area that might have cancer. The cells are viewed under a microscope to find out if they are abnormal.
- Imaging tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/diagnosticimaging.html>] .

What are the treatments for head and neck cancer?

The treatment for head and neck cancer will depend on the specific type of cancer, the stage (how advanced the cancer is), your overall health, and other factors. The treatment options might include:

- Surgery
- Radiation therapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/radiationtherapy.html>]
- Chemotherapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/cancerchemotherapy.html>]
- Cancer immunotherapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/cancerimmunotherapy.html>]
- Targeted therapy, which uses drugs or other substances that mainly attack specific cancer cells and cause less harm to normal cells

In some cases, you may need a combination of treatments. Sometimes surgery can affect how well you can chew, swallow, or talk. Rehabilitation, such as physical therapy, dietary counseling, and speech therapy, may help.


Can head and neck cancer be prevented?

There are steps you can take to help prevent head and neck cancer:



- Not smoking
- Limiting alcohol use or not drinking at all
- Getting regular dental exams [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/dental-exam/>]
- Talking to your provider about HPV vaccination

NIH: National Cancer Institute


Start Here

- Head and Neck Cancers [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/head-neck-fact-sheet>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/hoja-informativa-cabeza-cuello>]
- Head and Neck Cancers [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/head-neck-cancer.html>] (American Cancer Society)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/tipos/canceres-del-cuello-y-cabeza.html>]

Diagnosis and Tests


- Brain MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/en/info/mri-brain>]
 (American College of Radiology; Radiological Society of North America)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/es/info/mri-brain>]
- Head CT [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/en/info/headct>]  (American College of Radiology; Radiological Society of North America)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/es/info/headct>]

Treatments and Therapies


- Drugs Approved for Head and Neck Cancer [<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/drugs/head-neck>]
 (National Cancer Institute)
- Head and Neck Cancer Treatment [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/en/info/hdneck>]
(American College of Radiology; Radiological Society of North America)

Also in Spanish [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/es/info/hdneck>]


Related Issues

- HPV and Oropharyngeal Cancer [<https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/hpv/oropharyngeal-cancer.html>]
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/es/hpv/oropharyngeal-cancer.html>]
- Oral Complications of Cancer Therapies [<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/mouth-throat/oral-complications-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/cancer/tratamiento/efectos-secundarios/boca-garganta/complicaciones-orales-pdq#section/all>]

Specifics

- General Information about Metastatic Squamous Neck Cancer with Occult Primary [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/adult/metastatic-squamous-neck-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/adulto/tratamiento-escamoso-metastatico-cuello-pdq#_1]

Genetics

- Head and neck squamous cell carcinoma: MedlinePlus Genetics [<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/head-and-neck-squamous-cell-carcinoma>]  (National Library of Medicine)

Clinical Trials


- ClinicalTrials.gov: Head and Neck Neoplasms [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Head+and+Neck+Neoplasms%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)

Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: L-arginine vs. L-glutamine oral suspensions for radiation-induced oral mucositis: a triple-blind... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40603739>]
- Article: Intraoperative nerve-specific fluorescence visualization in head and neck surgery: a Phase... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40595556>]
- Article: Bao Yuan Gao vs. Calendula cream for radiotherapy-induced skin toxicity in... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40480289>]
- Head and Neck Cancer -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Head+and+Neck+Neoplasms%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bedat%5D+AND+%28patient+education+handout%5Bpt%5D+OR+guideline%5Bpt%5D+OR+clinical+trial%5Bpt%5D%29++NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]

Reference Desk




- Dictionary of Cancer Terms [<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/publicaciones/diccionarios/diccionario-cancer/>]

Find an Expert








- American Academy of Otolaryngology--Head and Neck Surgery [<https://www.entnet.org/>]
- American Cancer Society [<https://www.cancer.org/>]
- Choosing a Cancer Doctor [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/where-to-find-cancer-care/choosing-a-cancer-doctor.html>] (American Cancer Society)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/como-sobrellevar-el-cancer/encontrar-tratamiento/como-elegir-un-medico-y-un-hospital/como-seleccionar-a-un-medico.html>]

Find an ENT (Ear, Nose, and Throat Specialist) [<https://www.enthealth.org/find-ent/>]

(American Academy of Otolaryngology--Head and Neck Surgery)

- **National Cancer Institute** [<https://www.cancer.gov/>] 
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol>]
- **NCI - Designated Cancer Centers** [<https://www.cancer.gov/research/infrastructure/cancer-centers>]
 (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/investigacion/infraestructura/centros-oncologicos>]
- **Organizations that Offer Cancer Support Services** [<https://supportorgs.cancer.gov/home.aspx>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://supportorgs.cancer.gov/home.aspx?lang=2>]

Children

- **Childhood Esthesioneuroblastoma Treatment** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/child/esthesioneuroblastoma-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/infantil/tratamiento-estesioneuroblastoma-pdq>]
- **Childhood Laryngeal Tumors Treatment** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/child/laryngeal-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/infantil/tratamiento-laringe-pdq>]
- **Childhood Midline Tract Carcinoma with NUT Gene Changes Treatment** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/midline/patient-child-midline-tract-carcinoma-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/linea-media/paciente-tratamiento-carcinoma-linea-media-infantil-pdq>]
- **Childhood Nasopharyngeal Cancer Treatment** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/child/nasopharyngeal-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/infantil/tratamiento-nasofaringe-pdq>]
- **Childhood Oral Cavity Cancer Treatment** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/child/oral-cavity-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/infantil/tratamiento-cavidad-oral-pdq>]
- **Childhood Salivary Gland Tumors Treatment** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/child/salivary-gland-treatment-pdq>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cabeza-cuello/paciente/infantil/tratamiento-glandula-salival-pdq>]
- **Childhood Thyroid Cancer Treatment** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/thyroid/patient/child-thyroid-treatment-pdq>]
 (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/tiroides/paciente/tratamiento-tiroides-infantil-pdq>]

Patient Handouts

- **After chemotherapy - discharge** [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000012.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000012.htm>]
- **Glomus jugulare tumor** [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001634.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/001634.htm>]
- **Mouth and neck radiation - discharge** [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000058.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000058.htm>]
- **Neck dissection** [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007573.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/007573.htm>]
- **Neck dissection - discharge** [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000659.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000659.htm>]
- **Swallowing problems** [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000065.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000065.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

After chemotherapy - discharge [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000012.htm>]

Glomus jugulare tumor [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001634.htm>]

Head CT scan [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003786.htm>]

Mouth and neck radiation - discharge [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000058.htm>]

Neck dissection [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007573.htm>]

Neck dissection - discharge [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000659.htm>]

Swallowing problems [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000065.htm>]

Related Health Topics

Esophageal Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/esophagealcancer.html>]

Eye Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/eyecancer.html>]

Nasal Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/nasalcancer.html>]

Oral Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/oralcancer.html>]

Parathyroid Disorders [<https://medlineplus.gov/parathyroiddisorders.html>]

Salivary Gland Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/salivaryglandcancer.html>]

Throat Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/throatcancer.html>]

Thyroid Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/thyroidcancer.html>]

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Head and Neck Cancer* is the National Cancer Institute [<http://www.cancer.gov/>]

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