

Head and Neck Cancer

Understanding Head and Neck Cancer

Head and neck cancer can occur in different areas like the mouth, throat, sinuses, salivary glands, and more. These cancers are often related to previous infection with the HPV virus, the EBV virus, or smoking and alcohol use. Unfortunately, there are no special screening tests to catch head and neck cancer early, so these cancers are usually found when people have certain symptoms such as trouble eating and swallowing, which can lead to weight loss, as well as throat or neck soreness, lumps, voice changes, and pain.

Staging Head and Neck Cancer

After finding head and neck cancer, doctors try to figure out the extent of spread, through a process called staging. Tests include CT scans, MRIs, PET scans, and a procedure called an endoscopy, where doctors look inside the nasal passages or mouth/throat with a special camera.

This workup gives a clue on the tumor's size (T), whether cancer is in the lymph nodes (N), and if it has spread to other parts of the body (M). Stages go from 1 to 4, with stage 4 implying that the cancer has left the primary site and traveled to other parts of the body. The stage and type of head and neck cancer help doctors choose the right treatment.

Types of Head and Neck Cancer and Their Treatments

Treatment depends on the location of the cancer and often involves a team of doctors and specialists, like speech therapists and dietitians. For most head

and neck cancers, it takes a mix of treatments like surgery, radiation, and medicines.

- **Nasopharyngeal Cancer:** Doctors always test for the EBV virus because it's closely linked to this cancer. Depending on how advanced it is, treatment can be radiation alone or a mix of chemotherapy and radiation. During chemotherapy, drugs like cisplatin or carboplatin are often used.
- **Oral Cancer:** For early cases, surgery is usually the first choice. Sometimes, radiation works better, especially if surgery would be very complex. After surgery, more therapy like radiation or chemotherapy may be needed. Stage 4 oral cancers are often treated with the aim to cure, but sometimes the goal may shift to control the cancer's growth and maintain quality of life, because achieving a cure is usually not possible.
- **Oropharyngeal Cancer:** Doctors will test a sample of the tumor for HPV because it's a common cause. Treatment varies based on whether HPV is involved because the stages and sensitivity to radiation can differ.



Remember to discuss your specific diagnosis and treatment options with your doctor.