

HEAD AND NECK CANCER

Fact Sheet For Consumers

Types of Head and Neck Cancer

Head and neck cancer accounts for 3% of all cancers. Types of head and neck cancer include:

- Tongue
- Oral cavity (mouth)
- Nasal cavity and sinus
- Jaw
- Larynx
- Pharynx
- Salivary glands

Options for Medical and/or Surgical Treatment

Each individual is unique and requires a unique medical treatment plan. Discuss your specific treatment plan with your doctor. The following are the definitions of different treatment options:

- Tumor resection: Abnormal tissue is removed through surgery. Tissue from the borders of the tumor is examined and removed until the borders contain only healthy cells.
- Neck dissection: Lymph nodes in the neck that contain cancer cells are removed.
- Radiation therapy: High doses of radiation (high energy waves) are used to kill cancer cells. Radiation can be done in combination with chemotherapy for head and neck cancer.
- Chemotherapy: Drugs are used to kill cancer cells or to stop them from dividing.
- Reconstruction: Tissues from other areas of the body or artificial implants are used to rebuild areas where the tumor was removed.

Side Effects of Cancer Treatment

Possible Side effects of SURGERY:

- Problems with talking, breathing, chewing, and swallowing
- Swelling in the face and neck
- Neck and shoulder pain
- Decreased neck and shoulder motion
- Muscle weakness of the face, neck, and shoulder
- Sensation changes near the surgery area(s)
- Development of poor posture
- Scar tissue tightness
- Pain, stiffness, and swelling in areas where tissues have been removed to use for reconstruction

HEAD AND NECK CANCER

Fact Sheet For Consumers

Possible side effects of RADIATION THERAPY:

- Skin redness, irritation, blisters, or breakdown
- Pain with movement of the radiated area
- Excessive scar tissue build-up (during or any time after radiation)
- Dry mouth, loss of taste and/or appetite
- Sensation changes in the mouth, face, head neck, and shoulders
- Jaw pain and difficulty with mouth opening
- Increased risk of infection
- Fatigue, decreased endurance, and muscle weakness

Possible side effects of CHEMOTHERAPY:

- Fatigue
- Hair loss
- Low blood cell counts causing increased risk of bruising, bleeding, infection, and anemia
- Appetite changes, nausea and vomiting

What is physical therapy?

Physical therapists are experts in movement and function, especially when movement involves changes in “normal” movement patterns. Physical therapists are dedicated to promoting health and wellness of all Americans through preventing functional decline and the development of certain conditions. To learn more about physical therapy and physical therapists, please visit the American Physical Therapy Association’s (APTA’s) Consumer Website at www.choosept.com.

How can physical therapy help me?

Physical therapists can perform an evaluation in the hospital or in an outpatient clinic. There are multiple areas that physical therapists may help you including:

- Regaining strength, function, and independence
- Learning to manage side effects of cancer treatments
- Returning to your previous work and recreational activities
- Establishing healthy lifestyle habits for life-long wellness

Physical Therapy Evaluation

A physical therapy evaluation may include:

- Measurements of neck, mouth, and shoulder strength, range of motion, and quality of movement
- Assessment of the movement/flexibility of scar and other related tissues
- Assessment of cardiovascular endurance
- Assessment of posture
- Assessment of body mechanics with daily activities (lifting, bending, carrying objects, etc.)

HEAD AND NECK CANCER

Fact Sheet For Consumers

Physical Therapy Treatment

Based on the findings from your evaluation, your physical therapists will design a plan of care to address your individual needs.

Treatment interventions could include, but are not limited to:

- Postural education (awareness and endurance training)
- Body mechanics education and training
- Strengthening exercises
- Flexibility and stretching exercises
- Aerobic exercise (walking, biking, swimming)
- Manual therapy

Questions to Ask your Physical Therapist

- 1) Before Cancer Treatment - Prehabilitation
 - What can I do to improve my neck and shoulder motion and strength?
- 2) Two Weeks to Three Months After Surgery
 - What can I do to decrease pain and swelling?
 - How do I make sure that my scars heal well?
 - How do I know if my scar is infected?
 - How can I improve the movement of my neck and arms?
 - What type of aerobic exercise can I do? When can I start exercising?
 - What can I do to improve my posture?
 - What other services would I benefit from?

Your physical therapist may refer you to other healthcare professionals or services such as:

- Occupational Therapy
- Speech Therapy
- Registered Dietician for Nutrition and Weight Management
- Professional Psychological Support
- Palliative Care for Pain Management
- Support Groups
- Community Exercise Programs

Tell your physical therapist about your goals and activities that are meaningful to you! This will allow them to better help you return to those activities.

- 3) After Cancer Treatment / Long-term Management
 - What types of regular exercise should I do?
 - Are there any community exercise programs available in this area?
 - How can I modify my exercise routine to be safe/prevent injury?
 - How can I progress my exercise program if it becomes too easy?
 - How do I know if I am doing too much or too little exercise?
 - How do I know if I should return to physical therapy?

HEAD AND NECK CANCER

Fact Sheet For Consumers

How do I find a physical therapist?

If you think you may benefit from physical therapy, the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) offers a “Find A PT” database at www.choosept.com that can help you find a physical therapist who specializes in oncology rehabilitation. Insert “cancer” in the Practice Focus area.

You can also visit APTA Oncology’s consumer resources page at www.oncologypt.org.

Lymphedema

Lymphedema is a side effect of cancer treatment that can occur immediately after your surgery or at any time during your recovery process. The removal of lymph nodes and/or radiation to the head and neck can lead to decreased circulation of fluids in the tissues in the head and neck. This can cause prolonged swelling. For more information, you can refer to the APTA Oncology Fact Sheet on Lymphedema. Your doctor or physical therapist can answer questions regarding lymphedema, which may include:

- How do I know if I have lymphedema?
- What stretches and exercises can I do to decrease my edema?
- How do I protect my skin and reduce the risk of worsening lymphedema?
- Will I benefit from compression garments?
- How do I know if I have an infection?
- What do I do if I think I have an infection?

References and Resources

- National Cancer Institute: www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/head-and-neck
- Cancer Care: www.cancercare.org/diagnosis/head_and_neck_cancer
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org/cancer/oralcavityandoropharyngealcancer/
- Head and Neck Cancer Support International, Inc.: www.hncsupport.org
- Support for People with Oral and Head and Neck Cancer: www.spohnc.org
- APTA Oncology Lymphedema Fact Sheet: <https://oncologypt.org/oncology-for/>

Created by: Nhi Dang, Student Physical Therapist and Kimiko Yamada, PT, DPT

Disclaimer: This ‘Head and Neck Fact Sheet’ is a public service from APTA Oncology. It is not intended to be a substitute for professional health care.