



HEAD & NECK CANCER
AUSTRALIA
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FOLLOW-UP CARE AFTER HEAD AND NECK CANCER



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This information aims to help you understand what will happen after you have completed treatment for your head and neck cancer. This is often called 'follow-up' or 'survivorship', although the two terms have slightly different meanings. This may help answer some of your questions you may want to ask your cancer care team; it is not intended to replace advice or discussion between you and your [cancer care team](#).

You will be asked to return for regular check-up (follow-up) consultation visits with your cancer care team for many months (usually for 5 years) after your treatment for head and neck cancer. The purpose of this follow-up is to examine you thoroughly to ensure that the cancer has not returned and to manage any residual effects of the treatment. It is important that you keep up with the follow-up consultations as scheduled. Even if the cancer comes back, if it is caught early, it may be successfully treated. If you have any concerns between visits, you should contact your doctor.

Your follow-up will include a discussion about how you are feeling and managing with your usual activities, as well as details about any effects of treatment. It will include a physical examination of where the cancer was located, usually this includes your mouth, throat and neck. This may include [nasendoscopy](#) (a thin, flexible tube with a camera). Some people may also need blood tests or imaging studies such as [CT, MRI or PET scans](#) during follow-up. Ask your doctor if you need more information regarding these tests.

SMOKING

People who smoke can reduce the risk of their cancer coming back or getting a new cancer if they quit smoking. If you are a smoker it is very important that you stop smoking before treatment starts and then stay away from smoking. This will help you recover better from treatment and reduces the risk of complications after treatment. Talk to your doctor and cancer care team for advice on how to quit smoking. You will also find help at [Quitline](#).

IMPORTANCE OF ONGOING DENTAL CARE

A [dentist](#) plays an important role in your head and neck cancer treatment and survivorship.

Side-effects can often be prevented or reduced through regular dental check-ups before, during and after cancer treatment. If you have received radiation therapy you will be advised to see the dentist every six months for a check-up because the impact of the treatment on the health of your teeth can last for your whole life.

DIET and NUTRITION

It is important to maintain a good nutritional intake. Having a good diet can help you:

- get through all the recommended treatment without delays or interruptions
- reduce the chance of getting an infection
- recover quickly after treatment
- keep your strength and energy levels up so that you can continue with your daily activities.

WHAT CAN I DO TO ENSURE GOOD NUTRITION?

- Choose foods high in protein and calories (energy).
- Eat small meals or snacks more often if you have trouble eating a full meal.
- Drink calorie rich fluids, such as milk, milkshakes, smoothies or juice.
- Your dietitian may recommend supplement drinks that are high in protein and energy.
- If you have a dry, sore or sensitive mouth or throat, avoid foods that scratch or burn – for example citrus fruits, chili, pepper, vinegar, chips or toast can irritate the mouth and throat.
- Hard dry foods like bread and steak can be difficult to swallow if you have less saliva or have swallowing problems. If you want to try these foods, you may want to add gravy, sauces or spreads to these foods and drink fluids with each mouthful.

A dietitian is an expert in food and nutrition. Your dietitian can help you work out a plan for you to get all the nutrition and energy you need from your diet. The dietitian may give you some tips on making eating easier, staying well-hydrated and enjoying your food.

EXERCISE

It is important to stay active during and after treatment for head and neck cancer. It may be helpful to see an exercise professional, such as a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist. They are trained to give you advice on exercise. Your doctor can refer you to a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist who can work with you to create an exercise program that you are able to do.

SPEECH, VOICE AND SWALLOWING

Treatment for head and neck cancer may cause changes to parts of your mouth (lips, teeth, tongue, palate) and/or throat (pharynx, larynx), which can affect your ability to speak and/or swallow. These changes may only last a short time or they may be permanent.

Speech and voice problems can affect your daily life. This may leave you feeling frustrated, distressed or embarrassed particularly if people have trouble understanding your speech.

If your treatment has caused changes to your speech, voice or swallowing, you can get help from a speech pathologist. A speech pathologist is an expert in difficulties with communication and swallowing. Your doctor may recommend you see a speech pathologist before, during and after your treatment.

Your speech pathologist can:

- give you exercises or tips to help your speech and voice
- help you plan other ways of communicating, such as writing or using a computerised voice to speak for you
- show you how to use additional devices or speech aids if you need them
- show you techniques for safe swallowing, such as changing your head position, or adjusting the thickness of food / liquids to make them easier to swallow.

Make sure to drink plenty of water when eating and include gravy or sauces with foods to help you swallow them more easily. You may also get help from the rest of your cancer care team (your doctors and dietitian) and in some cases they may recommend a feeding tube.

MENTAL HEALTH FOR PEOPLE WITH CANCER

Being diagnosed with cancer and having gone through cancer treatment can lead to extra worries or concerns for you and for the people caring for you. You may experience any of the following:

- low mood or depression
- anxiety or distress
- irritability
- fear of cancer recurrence
- changes in your relationships
- changes in sexual activity

You may have got through the diagnosis and treatment for head and neck cancer, but you may be finding it difficult to deal with some of the side effects of treatment. You may find it helpful to talk openly about your feelings to your close family and friends. You should also feel free to speak with your [cancer care team](#) about any difficulties you may be experiencing with speaking, swallowing, your appearance, your emotional concerns and worries. They may be able to give you helpful advice on managing some of the side effects and worries. They may also give you a referral to a psychologist or another trained healthcare professional who can work with you to help you manage your worries and fears.

You may find it helps to join a patient support group and speak with others who are having treatment for head and neck cancer. You can also find help and advice in online self-help resources such as [beyondblue](#).

You may want to write specific questions here to ask your doctor or cancer care team

About Head and Neck Cancer Australia

Head and Neck Cancer Australia (formerly Beyond Five) is Australia's only charity dedicated to providing information and support to people living with head and neck cancer, caregivers, family and healthcare professionals.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia's mission is to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by head and neck cancer through education and access to support and to raise awareness of head and neck cancer nationally.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia supports people through their cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and life after cancer by providing comprehensive, easy to understand and easy to access information. We have the only Directory of Head and Neck Cancer services and support groups available in Australia and New Zealand helping people to find the right services and support when they need it most.

Phone: 1300 424 848

Email: contact@headandneckcancer.org.au

Web: www.headandneckcancer.org.au

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