



HEAD & NECK CANCER
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WHAT IS HEAD AND NECK CANCER?





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This information may help answer some of your questions and help you think of other questions that 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.

WHAT IS CANCER

Our bodies are made up of millions of cells. Each cell has a specific job. Groups of cells with the same job make up tissues and organs, for example, skin or muscles.

Cells multiply to help our bodies grow and repair. When cells multiply in an abnormal way, they can form a lump (also known as a tumour), and damage the normal cells close by.

Not all lumps are cancer. Lumps or tumours that are not cancer are called **benign**. When a lump is a cancer, it is called **malignant**. That means the cancer cells take over the area of the body they are growing in. Cancer can spread from one place to other parts of the body. Cancer spreads when cells travel through the lymphatic system to the lymph nodes or when cells break off the main lump and get carried in the blood to other parts of the body, where they can start growing. This is called metastasis.

AN OVERVIEW TO HEAD AND NECK CANCER

Head and neck cancer includes a range of different cancers that are classified based on their location in the head or neck and the type of cancer cells.

Head and neck cancer often refers specifically to cancers that begin in the cells that line the moist mucosal surfaces including the mouth (oral cavity), nose and sinuses, throat (pharynx) and voice box (larynx).

- These cancers are usually squamous cell carcinomas (SCCs) and account for about 95% of cases.
- Mucosal head and neck cancers are diagnosed in approximately 3500 Australians every year; representing 2–3% of all cancers.
- Mucosal head and neck cancer is nearly twice as common in men and often diagnosed in people over the age of 50.

Thyroid cancers are more common than mucosal head and neck cancers and occur in 2400 Australians every year. They are more common in women and often occur at a younger age.

Skin cancers of the head and neck are so common in Australia that we don't even know how many occur. It is estimated that more than 500 000 Australians are treated every year for skin cancer. They are more common in men and become more common as you get older, mainly due to sun exposure.



Less commonly, head and neck cancers may occur in the salivary glands, and other tissues in the face, neck, eyes and ears.

CAUSES OF HEAD AND NECK CANCER

The most important risk factors for mucosal head and neck cancer are tobacco (cigarette smoking, cigars, pipes, chewing tobacco or snuff), alcohol use and exposure to the human papillomavirus (HPV)

Those with a long history of tobacco use, heavy tobacco use and who use both tobacco and alcohol are at a significantly higher risk of head and neck cancer.

Infection with HPV is also a risk factor for some types of head and neck cancer, particularly those involving the tonsils or tongue base (known as oropharyngeal cancer). The HPV related cancers, particularly those of the tonsils and tongue base, are now one of the most common types of head and neck cancer in Australia. These cancers are not related to smoking or alcohol and often have a better response to treatment. HPV is very common in the general population, and most people who acquire HPV never develop cancer.

Other risk factors for head and neck cancer include increasing age, male gender, race, inhalation of certain chemicals and dusts, the Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV), chewing betel nut and possibly a diet low in fruit and vegetables.

Sun exposure is the most important risk factor for skin cancers, particularly repeated sunburn as a young adult.

Previous radiation exposure is also an important risk factor for head and neck cancer, in particular thyroid cancers. There is usually a delay of at least 10 years from the time of exposure to development of the cancer.

Some patients may not have any identifiable cause for their cancer.

You know your own body better than anybody else. If you think that something isn't right or you notice any signs of Head and Neck Cancer, speak with your regular doctor.

About Head and Neck Cancer Australia

Head and Neck Cancer Australia is Australia's only national 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

***Head and Neck Cancer Australia Disclaimer:** You acknowledge and accept that the information in this factsheet is for general information purposes only. It is not intended, nor should it be relied on, as medical or legal advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a physician or other licensed healthcare provider. You agree that if you have individual healthcare-related questions you should contact your doctor promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information contained here. You also agree that Head and Neck Cancer Australia is not liable for any injury or damage to persons or property (howsoever caused, including by negligence) arising out of or related to any use of Head and Neck Cancer Australia's patient education materials, or for any errors or omissions.*

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