

# ASCO ANSWERS

## LARYNGEAL AND HYPOPHARYNGEAL CANCER

### WHAT IS LARYNGEAL OR HYPOPHARYNGEAL CANCER?

Cancer begins in the larynx (voice box) and/or the hypopharynx (gullet; lower part of throat that surrounds the larynx) when normal cells grow uncontrollably and form a tumor. About 95% of these cancers begin in the flat, squamous cells in the lining of the larynx and hypopharynx.

### WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE LARYNX?

The larynx is a tube-shaped organ in the neck that is important for breathing, talking, and swallowing. It is located at the top of the windpipe, or trachea. The front walls protrude from the neck to form what most people call the Adam's apple.

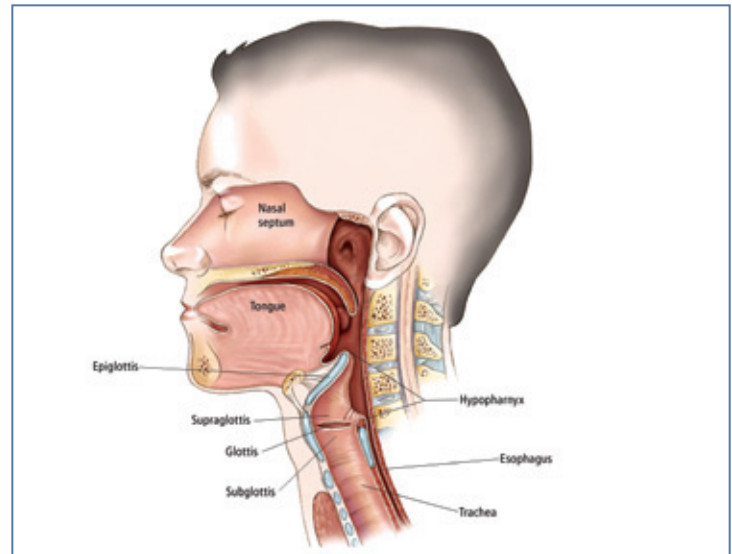


Illustration by Robert Morale/Visual Explanations, LLC. © 2004 American Society of Clinical Oncology.

*Find additional cancer information at [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net).*

### WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing the cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. There are five stages for laryngeal or hypopharyngeal cancer: stage 0 (zero) and stages I through IV (one through four). Illustrations for these stages are available at [www.cancer.net/laryngeal](http://www.cancer.net/laryngeal).

### HOW IS LARYNGEAL OR HYPOPHARYNGEAL CANCER TREATED?

The treatment of laryngeal or hypopharyngeal cancer depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. The three main treatment options are surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. When planning treatment, the doctor also considers how treatment might affect how a person feels, looks, talks, eats, and breathes. It is often possible to preserve the larynx during treatment. The goal of surgery is to remove the cancerous tumor and some of the healthy tissue around it. Radiation therapy may be the main treatment for laryngeal or hypopharyngeal cancer, or it may be used after surgery to destroy small pockets of cancer that cannot be removed surgically. Chemotherapy may be used in combination with radiation therapy and/or surgery to increase the chance of destroying cancer cells. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of laryngeal or hypopharyngeal cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team.

### HOW CAN I COPE WITH LARYNGEAL OR HYPOPHARYNGEAL CANCER?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are other steps. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What type of laryngeal or hypopharyngeal cancer do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the laryngeal or hypopharyngeal cancer?
- Would you explain my treatment options? What clinical trials are open to me?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- Should I see other specialists before treatment, such as a radiation oncologist, medical oncologist, plastic surgeon, oncologic dentist, or a speech pathologist?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to eat, swallow, or speak?



Learn more about  
laryngeal and  
hypopharyngeal  
cancer

- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at [www.cancer.net/laryngeal](http://www.cancer.net/laryngeal).

**Cancer.Net**<sup>™</sup>

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO<sup>®</sup>

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net), or call 888-651-3038.**

*The ideas and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) or The Conquer Cancer Foundation. The information in this fact sheet is not intended as medical or legal advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a physician or other licensed health care provider. Patients with health care-related questions should call or see their physician or other health care provider promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information encountered here. The mention of any product, service, or treatment in this fact sheet should not be construed as an ASCO endorsement. ASCO is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of or related to any use of ASCO's patient education materials, or to any errors or omissions.*

## TERMS TO KNOW

### Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

### Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

### Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

### Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

### Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

### Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

### Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer

### Laryngectomy:

The removal of part or all of the larynx

### Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

### Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

### Tracheostomy:

An operation to create an opening (stoma) into the windpipe or trachea

### Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue