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Head and Neck Cancer - Overview [1]

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ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about this disease and the parts of the body it may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net?s Guide to Head and Neck Cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen. Think of that menu as a roadmap to this full guide.

Cancer begins when normal cells change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass called a tumor. A tumor can be cancerous or benign. A cancerous tumor is malignant, meaning it can spread to other parts of the body. A benign tumor means the tumor will not spread.

Head and neck cancer is a term used to describe a number of different malignant tumors that develop in or around the throat, larynx, nose, sinuses, and mouth (see below).

Most head and neck cancers are squamous cell carcinomas, meaning they begin in the flat, squamous cells that make up the thin surface layer of the structures in the head and neck. Directly beneath this lining, which is called the epithelium, some areas of the head and neck have a layer of moist tissue, called the mucosa. If a cancer is limited to the squamous layer of cells, it is called carcinoma in situ. If the cancer has grown beyond this cell layer and moved into the deeper tissue, then it is called invasive squamous cell carcinoma. If the cancer starts in the salivary glands, the tumor will usually be classified as an adenocarcinoma, adenoid cystic carcinoma [3], or mucoepidermoid carcinoma.

Types of head and neck cancer

There are five main types of head and neck cancer, each named according to the part of the body where they develop. For more information about a specific type, click on one of the names below.

Laryngeal and Hypopharyngeal Cancer [4]. The larynx is commonly called the voice box. It 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 hypopharynx is also called the gullet. It is the lower part of the throat that surrounds the larynx.

Nasal Cavity and Paranasal Sinus Cancer [5]. The nasal cavity is the space just behind the nose where air passes on the way to the throat. The paranasal sinuses are the air-filled areas

that surround the nasal cavity.

Nasopharyngeal Cancer [6]. The nasopharynx is the air passageway at the upper part of the throat behind the nose.

Oral and Oropharyngeal Cancer [7]. The oral cavity includes the mouth and tongue. The oropharynx includes the middle of the throat from the tonsils to the tip of the voice box.

Salivary Gland Cancer [8]. The salivary gland is tissue that produces saliva, which is the fluid that is released into the mouth to keep it moist and that contains enzymes that begin breaking down food.

Other types of cancer can also be located in this area of the body, but the diagnosis and treatment are much different. Specific information about brain tumors [9], esophageal cancer [10] , eye cancer [11], parathyroid cancer [12], sarcoma [13], and thyroid cancer [14] is available in separate sections on Cancer.Net.

To continue reading this guide, use the menu on the side of your screen to select another section.

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