Head and Neck Cancer - Risk Factors and Prevention [1]

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ON THIS PAGE: You will find out more about what factors increase the chance of this type of cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

A risk factor is anything that increases a person?s chance of developing cancer. Although risk factors often influence the development of cancer, most do not directly cause cancer. Some people with several risk factors never develop the disease, while others with no known risk factors do. However, knowing your risk factors and talking about them with your doctor may help you make more informed lifestyle and health care choices.

Two substances greatly increase the risk of developing a head and neck cancer:

- **Tobacco [3].** Smoking cigarettes, cigars, or pipes; chewing tobacco; and using snuff are the single largest risk factors for head and neck cancer. Eighty-five percent (85%) of head and neck cancers are linked to tobacco use, and the amount of tobacco use may affect prognosis, which is the chance of recovery. In addition, secondhand smoke [4] may increase a person?s risk of developing head and neck cancer.

- **Alcohol [5].** Frequent and heavy alcohol consumption raises the risk of developing cancer in the mouth, pharynx, larynx, and esophagus. Using alcohol and tobacco together increases this risk even more.

Other factors that can raise a person?s risk of developing head and neck cancer include:

- **Prolonged sun exposure.** This is especially linked to cancer in the lip area, as well as skin cancer [6] of the head and neck.

- **Human papillomavirus (HPV) [7].** Research indicates that infection with this virus is becoming an increasingly common risk factor for some types of head and neck cancer. HPV is most often passed from person to person during sexual activity. There are different types, or strains, of HPV. Some strains are more strongly associated with certain types of cancer. HPV vaccines protect against certain strains of the virus. (See the Latest Research [8] section for more information.)

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Epstein-Barr virus (EBV). Exposure to EBV, which is more commonly known as the virus that causes mononucleosis or "mono," plays a role in the development of nasopharyngeal cancer [9].

- **Gender.** Men are two to three times more likely than women to develop head and neck cancer. However, the rate of head and neck cancer in women has been rising for several decades.
- **Age.** People over the age of 40 are at higher risk for head and neck cancer.
- **Race.** Black people are more likely than white people to develop certain types of head and neck cancer.
- **Poor oral and dental hygiene**. Poor care of the mouth and teeth has been suggested as a factor that may increase the risk of head and neck cancer.
- **Environmental or occupational inhalants**. Exposure to asbestos, wood dust, paint fumes, and certain chemicals may increase a person?s risk of head and neck cancer.
- **Marijuana use.** Research suggests that people who have used marijuana may be at higher risk for head and neck cancer.
- **Poor nutrition**. A diet low in vitamins A and B can raise a person?s risk of head and neck cancer.
- **Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and laryngopharyngeal reflux disease (LPRD).** Reflux of stomach acid into the upper airway and throat has been suggested as a factor associated with the development of head and neck cancer.
- **Weakened immune system**. A weakened immune system can raise a person?s risk of head and neck cancer.

Prevention

Different factors cause different types of cancer. Researchers continue to look into what factors cause this type of cancer. Although there is no proven way to completely prevent this disease, you may be able to lower your risk. Talk with your doctor for more information about your personal risk of cancer.

Stopping the use of all tobacco products [10] is the most important thing a person can do to reduce their risk, even for people who have been smoking for many years. Other steps that can reduce the risk of head and neck cancer include:

- Avoiding alcohol
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Discussing marijuana as a risk factor with your doctor and avoiding marijuana use

- Using sunscreen regularly [11], including lip balm with an adequate sun protection factor (SPF)
- Reducing your risk of HPV infection by limiting the number of sexual partners, since having many partners increases the risk of HPV infection. Using a condom cannot fully protect you from HPV during sex.
- Maintaining proper care of dentures. Poorly fitting dentures can trap tobacco and alcohol?s cancer-causing substances. Denture wearers should have their dentures evaluated by a dentist at least every five years to ensure a good fit. Dentures should be removed every night and cleaned and rinsed thoroughly every day.

The next section in this guide is Screening [12], and it explains how tests may find cancer before signs or symptoms appear. Or, use the menu on the side of your screen to choose another section to continue reading this guide.

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/head-and-neck-cancer/risk-factors-and-prevention
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25002
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25004
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24981
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/31378
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24561
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/18919
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/19412
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/25003
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/24659
[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/33491