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PDF generated on July 26, 2016 from <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/head-and-neck-cancer/stages>

[Head and Neck Cancer - Stages](#) [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 05/2015

ON THIS PAGE: You will learn about how doctors describe a cancer's growth or spread. This is called the stage. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

Staging is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. Doctors use diagnostic tests to find out the cancer's stage, so staging may not be complete until all of the tests are finished. Knowing the stage helps the doctor to decide what kind of treatment is best and can help predict a patient's prognosis.

TNM staging system

One tool that doctors use to describe the stage is the TNM system. Doctors use the results from diagnostic tests and scans to answer these questions:

- **Tumor (T):** How large is the primary tumor? Where is it located?
- **Node (N):** Has the tumor spread to the lymph nodes? If so, where and how many?
- **Metastasis (M):** Has the cancer metastasized to other parts of the body? If so, where and how much?

The results are combined to determine the stage of cancer for each person. The stage provides

a common way of describing the cancer, so doctors can work together to plan the best treatments.

There is a different staging system for each type of head and neck cancer, and detailed information about these stages can be found in the specific cancer type section. See the [Overview](#) [3] for a complete list of these types of cancer.

Recurrent head and neck cancer

Recurrent cancer is cancer that has come back after treatment. If the cancer does return, there will be another round of tests to learn about the extent of the recurrence. These tests and scans are often similar to those done at the time of the original [diagnosis](#) [4].

Information about the cancer's stage will help the doctor recommend a specific treatment plan. The [next section in this guide is Treatment Options](#) [5]. 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/stages>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18909>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18913>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18915>