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Head and Neck Cancer - Latest Research [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 06/2014

ON THIS PAGE: You will read about the scientific research being done now to learn more about this type of cancer and how to treat it. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

Doctors are working to learn more about head and neck cancer, ways to prevent it, how to best treat it, and how to provide the best care to people diagnosed with this disease. The following areas of research may include new options for patients through clinical trials [3]. Always talk with your doctor about the diagnostic and treatment options best for you.

New medications. Many studies are underway investigating new types of cancer medications to treat head and neck cancers. Immunotherapy [4], which is designed to boost the body's natural defenses to fight the cancer, is of particular interest currently.

Combined therapies. Most research for head and neck cancers focuses on combining different types of treatments to improve the effectiveness and the patient?s quality of life.

Radiofrequency thermal ablation (RFA). Used on a localized tumor that cannot be removed by surgery, RFA is a minimally invasive treatment option that applies heat to the tumor.

Gene therapy. Gene therapy is a targeted form of treatment that uses biologic gene manipulation to change bits of genetic code in a person?s cells. Although gene therapy is relatively new, it appears to show promising potential for treating head and neck cancer.

Photodynamic therapy. In photodynamic therapy, a light-sensitive substance is injected into the tumor that stays longer in cancer cells than in normal cells. A laser is directed at the tumor, which destroys the cancer cells. The long-term effects of photodynamic therapy are still being investigated.

Proton therapy [5]. Proton radiation therapy can be used as a boost (part of treatment) to reduce the damage done to healthy tissue. It can be used as part of the treatment for some skull-base tumors, including nasopharyngeal cancer; chordoma, a rare tumor that usually occurs in the spine and base of the skull; and chondrosarcoma, a cartilage-based tumor, to further limit the radiation dose to healthy structures, such as the optic (eye) nerves and brainstem.

HPV [6]. Research continues regarding the link between HPV and head and neck cancers, evaluating both why this virus raises the risk for the disease and why it may affect treatment results in some cases. Studies are also underway to determine whether the HPV vaccine that is currently used to prevent cervical, vaginal, vulvar, and anal cancer is effective at preventing some head and neck cancers as well.

Supportive care. Clinical trials are underway to find better ways of reducing symptoms and side effects of current head and neck cancer treatments in order to improve patients? comfort and quality of life.

Looking for More About the Latest Research?

If you would like additional information about the latest areas of research regarding head and neck cancer, explore these related items that take you outside of this guide:

- To find clinical trials specific to your diagnosis, talk with your doctor or search online clinical trial databases now [7].
- Review research announced at the 2013 and 2014 ASCO annual meetings [8].
- Visit ASCO?s CancerProgress.Net [9] website to learn more about the historical pace of research for head and neck cancer. Please note this link takes you to a separate ASCO website.

The next section addresses how to cope with the symptoms of the disease or the side effects of its treatment. Use the menu on the side of your screen to select Coping with Side Effects, or you can select another section, to continue reading this guide.

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/head-and-neck-cancer/latest-research
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/18916
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24726
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24521
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24561
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24878
[8] http://www.cancer.net/research-and-advocacy/research-summaries?field_page_topic_tid_2=All&field_page_topic_tid=275&date_filter%5bvalue%5d%5byear%5d=
[9] http://www.cancerprogress.net/timeline/head-and-neck-cancer