

Laryngeal and Hypopharyngeal Cancer - Overview [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 04/2014

ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about these diseases and the parts of the body they may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net's Guide to Laryngeal and Hypopharyngeal 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.

About the larynx and hypopharynx

The larynx, commonly called the voice box, 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. The larynx contains the vocal folds (vocal cords) that vibrate to make sound for speech production. During breathing, the larynx opens like a valve to allow air to pass into the lungs. During swallowing, the vocal folds come together and, with a flap of tissue called the epiglottis, protect the airway and prevent food from entering to the lungs.

There are three parts of the larynx:

Glottis. The middle section that holds the vocal folds.

Supraglottis. The area above the vocal folds.

Subglottis. The area below the vocal folds that connects the larynx to the windpipe.

The hypopharynx, also called the gullet, is the lower part of the throat. It surrounds the larynx. The pharynx, more commonly known as the throat, is a hollow tube about five inches long that starts behind the nose (nasopharynx) and ends at the level of the larynx (laryngopharynx). The pharynx leads into the esophagus, which is the tube that goes to the stomach.

About cancer in the larynx or hypopharynx

Cancer can begin in any part of the larynx or hypopharynx. Cancer occurs in the larynx or hypopharynx 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.

About 95% of all cancers of the larynx and hypopharynx are categorized as squamous cell carcinomas, meaning they began in the flat, squamous cells that form the linings of these organs.

Laryngeal and hypopharyngeal cancers are two of the main types of cancer in the head and neck region, a grouping called head and neck cancer [3]. This section covers both laryngeal cancer and hypopharyngeal cancer together since treatments are often similar; however, these are two separate types of cancer.

Looking for More of an Overview?

If you would like additional introductory information, explore these related items. Please note these links take you to other sections on Cancer.Net:

- ASCO Answers Fact Sheet [4]: Read a one-page fact sheet (available as a PDF) that offers an easy-to-print introduction to these types of cancer.
- Cancer.Net En Español [5]: Read about laryngeal and hypopharyngeal cancer in Spanish. Infórmase sobre cáncer laríngeo e hipofaríngeo [5] en español.

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

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/laryngeal-and-hypopharyngeal-cancer/overview>

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

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

[4] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/vignette/ASCO_Answers_Laryngeal.pdf

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/es/node/18177>