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Salivary Gland 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 this disease and the parts of the body it may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net?s Guide to Salivary Gland 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 salivary glands

The salivary glands are tissues that produce saliva. Saliva is the fluid that is released into the mouth to keep it moist and contains enzymes that begin breaking down food. Saliva also helps prevent infections of the mouth and throat.

There are clusters of salivary glands in several places in the head and neck, including below the tongue, on the sides of the face (in the cheek area) just in front of the ears, in the area of the upper jaw along the inside of the teeth and the soft palate, and under the jawbone. There are also smaller clusters of salivary glands in parts of the tissue that lines the upper digestive tract, known as the mucosa, and the windpipe.

Doctors often refer to three pairs of salivary glands as the major salivary glands:

Parotid glands. These are the largest salivary glands, and they are located on either side of the face in front of the ears.

Submandibular glands. These are found under the jawbone.

Sublingual glands. These are found in the bottom of the mouth under the tongue.

As described above, there are many other smaller areas that contain salivary glands. These are often called the minor salivary glands.

About salivary gland cancer

Cancer begins when normal cells change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass of tissue 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.

Both benign and cancerous tumors can begin in any of the major or minor salivary glands. Most tumors (80%) in the parotid gland, and about half of the tumors in the submandibular gland, are benign. Sublingual gland tumors are almost always cancerous. Most cancerous tumors of this type begin in the parotid gland or in the submandibular glands.

There are many subtypes of salivary gland tumors, depending on the type of cell where it started and an evaluation of tumor cells under a microscope. This is explained in more detail in the Stages [3] section.

This section covers primary salivary gland cancer, which is cancer that begins in the salivary glands. Sometimes another type of cancer, most commonly melanoma [4] or another type of skin cancer [5], can spread to the salivary glands or to the nearby lymph nodes located inside and surrounding the parotid gland and next to the submandibular gland. Lymph nodes are tiny, bean-shaped organs that fight infection. For more information about cancer that started in another part of the body and then spread to the salivary glands, please see Cancer.Net?s guide for that type of cancer [6].

Salivary gland cancer is one of the five main types of cancer in the head and neck region, a grouping called head and neck cancer [7].

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/salivary-gland-cancer/overview
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/19356
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/19251
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/19618
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