

[Nasopharyngeal Cancer - Overview](#) [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 03/2015

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 Nasopharyngeal 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.

Cancer begins when healthy cells in the body change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass or growth of tissue called a tumor. A tumor can be cancerous or benign. A cancerous tumor is malignant, meaning it can grow and spread to other parts of the body. A benign tumor means the tumor can grow but will not spread.

There are several types of benign nasopharyngeal tumors, including:

- Angiofibromas and hemangiomas that involve the vascular (blood-carrying) system
- Tumors that develop in the lining of the nasopharynx, including the minor salivary glands

About nasopharyngeal cancer

Nasopharyngeal cancer may also be called nasopharyngeal carcinoma or NPC. It is one of five main types of cancer in the head and neck region, a grouping called [head and neck cancer](#) [3].

NPC is a disease of the nasopharynx, which is the air passageway at the upper part of the pharynx (throat) behind the nose. The nostrils lead through the nasal cavity into the

nasopharynx, and an opening called the Eustachian tube opening, which is located on each side of the nasopharynx, leads into the middle ear on each side.

The nasopharynx contains several types of tissue, and each contains several types of cells. Different cancers can develop from each kind of cell. For example, many types of nasopharyngeal cancer contain white blood cells, and these lymphocytes give it the name of lymphoepithelioma. The differences are important because they determine the seriousness of the cancer and the type of treatment needed.

Subtypes of nasopharyngeal cancer

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), NPC is classified into three subtypes:

- Keratinizing squamous cell carcinoma (WHO type 1)
- Nonkeratinizing squamous cell carcinoma (WHO type 2)
- Undifferentiated or poorly differentiated carcinoma, including lymphoepithelioma and anaplastic variants (WHO type 3)

See more details about differentiation in the [Stages and Grades](#) [4] section.

Looking for More of an Overview?

If you would like additional introductory information, explore this related item. Please note this link will take you to another section on Cancer.Net:

- [Cancer.Net Patient Education Video](#) [5]: View a short video led by an ASCO expert in head and neck cancer that provides basic information and areas of research.

The [next section in this guide is Statistics](#) [6], and it helps explain how many people are diagnosed with this disease and general survival rates. 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/nasopharyngeal-cancer/overview>

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

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31296>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19415>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/29771>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19410>

