TREATING HEAD AND NECK CANCER

Treatment for head and neck cancers depends on several factors, including the type of cancer, tumor size and stage, tumor location and the patient’s general health. Effective treatment for head and neck cancers requires a team approach. The team includes a surgeon, a radiation oncologist and a medical oncologist. Surgery and radiation therapy are the best options for cancer found in its earliest stages. For more advanced tumors, combination therapy including surgery, radiation therapy and/or chemotherapy may yield the best results.

Head and neck cancer treatment options include:

- **Surgery**
  - Surgery and radiation therapy focus directly on treating the tumor. Medication is often recommended to improve cure rates. A medical oncologist will evaluate you and determine what medications may be most helpful.
  - There are two main categories of systemic therapy (treatment that is injected into the bloodstream).

- **Radiation Therapy**
  - Radiation therapy is one of the best treatments available for head and neck cancer. It involves a radiation oncologist delivering focused radiation to kill cancer cells. Surrounding healthy tissue may also be affected. However, healthy normal cells are better able to heal from radiation injury. For head and neck cancer, new technologies in radiation treatment allow for preservation of important organs. These new techniques can give patients equal cure rates with better swallowing and/or voice function when compared to surgically removing a tumor. In some cases, radiation will be used with radiation therapy as well.
  - An example of the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR). Targeted therapy can help precisely position you for daily treatment. Sometimes, these marks can be used with radiation therapy to help accurately position the patients during treatment. Your radiation oncologist will map where to treat. This procedure, called simulation, involves having X-rays and a CT scan.

- **Chemotherapy**
  - Chemotherapy has the ability to destroy cancer cells by different methods. Often, one to three different types of drugs may be combined to get the best outcome. The dose and schedule for treatment varies in some cases, chemotherapy may be helpful before radiation treatment. This type of treatment is called neoadjuvant therapy. Targeted therapy involves focusing anti-cancer treatment on certain molecules. A different class of targeted agents may be used with radiation therapy as well.

- **Internal Radiation Therapy**
  - Internal radiation therapy is also called brachytherapy. This treatment involves inserting radioactive material into a tumor or surrounding tissue to give a specified focused dose of radiation. For head and neck cancers, brachytherapy is often used with external beam radiation therapy. It may also be used alone or after surgery. During brachytherapy, your radiation oncologist places tiny, hollow plastic tubes into the tumor and surrounding tissue. These tubes are loaded with tiny radioactive seeds that remain in place for a short time to kill the cancer. The seeds and the tubes are then removed. With low-dose-rate brachytherapy, the seeds will be left in place for one to three days. For high-dose-rate brachytherapy, a single radioactive seed stops at various positions along the tubes for short intervals to deliver the dose. It is usually administered in a few sessions over two or more days.

- **Dental Care**
  - Dental care is an essential part of preparing for radiation treatment. Before you begin head and neck radiation, your doctor may need to examine your teeth and gums. If the dentist determines that you need any dental work, such as having bad teeth removed, this must be done before beginning treatment. After radiation treatment your jaw bone may not heal as well. Dental work may delay starting radiation treatment for up to two weeks to allow time for healing. Ask your doctor whether you need to see your dentist before starting treatment.

- **EXTERNAL BEAM RADIATION THERAPY**
  - External beam radiation therapy involves a series of painless sessions. Treatments are usually scheduled daily, Monday through Friday, for five to seven weeks. In some cases, your radiation oncologist may schedule your radiation treatments to be twice a day.

- **DENTAL CARE**
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Surgery

Surgery is another important approach to head and neck cancer treatment. From biopsy to evaluating the nose, mouth and throat with a flexible endoscope, your surgeon can determine whether the tumor has spread. If surgery is the main treatment, some surrounding healthy tissue may also be removed. Lymph nodes in the neck.

- **Medical Therapy**
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- **CAREGIVING FOR YOURSELF DURING TREATMENT**
  - Cancer treatment can be difficult. You have many issues to cope with. Your oncology team, along with family and friends, are available to help.
    - Get plenty of rest during treatment.
    - Take breaks when you need them. The key is to be aware of your limits and make sure you are aware of your limits.
    - Tell your doctor about any medications, vitamins or supplements you are taking to make sure they are safe to use during radiation therapy.
    - Eat a balanced diet. If food tastes funny or if you’re having trouble eating, tell your doctor or nurse.
    - Treat the skin exposed to radiation with special care. Stay out of the sun. Avoid hot or cold packs. Only use lotions and ointments after checking with your doctor or nurse. Clean the area with warm water and mild soap.
    - Avoid wearing clothing that covers the radiation site or where toxicity is expected to occur. Use fluoride toothpaste without abrasives. Floss gently between your teeth daily using a wax, non-stick dental floss. If needed, it may help to rinse daily with a salt and baking soda solution.
External beam radiation therapy is not invasive, so it is rare for side effects to show up immediately. Side effects are different for each patient. In some cases, side effects lessen within several weeks, but with more intensive treatment the time for improvement takes longer.

- **Mild tiredness**
- **Dry mouth or thick phlegm**
- **Change in voice**
- **Hair loss**
- **Irritation of the head, neck, and face**

Some side effects can be controlled with medications and changes to your diet. Ask your doctor or nurse whether you should make changes to your diet. Tell them if you experience any discomfort so they can help you feel better.