

Head and Neck Cancer

Signs, symptoms and testing



Key signs and symptoms

01

Mouth ulcers that don't go away

02

Ear pain or hearing loss

03

Swollen glands

04

A persistent sore throat

These symptoms and others that can be associated with head and neck cancer can be caused by conditions other than cancer but it's important to get anything that is different or new checked by a GP.

Head and neck cancer basics and next steps

Who is at higher risk for head and neck cancer?

Anyone can get head and neck cancer, however it is three times more common in men than women. This may be related to higher rates of smoking among men. Those who smoke, drink alcohol, or have had the HPV (human papillomavirus), are at higher risk.

How is head and neck cancer diagnosed?

If your GP or dentist thinks your symptoms could be linked to cancer, they will refer you to see a specialist doctor within two weeks. This is usually an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, or an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist surgeon. If your only symptom is a lump in your neck, you might be referred to a lump clinic.

How can head and neck cancer be prevented?

46–88% of head and neck cancer cases in the UK are preventable through lifestyle choices such as not smoking or drinking alcohol, and maintaining a healthy weight. The HPV vaccine has been shown to protect against specific types of head and neck cancer.

Are there any other symptoms of head and neck cancer?

Yes. The key signs and symptoms are listed above, however additional symptoms may include:

- **A red or white patch** anywhere inside the mouth, or a patch that is red and white together
- **A lump on the lip** or anywhere inside the mouth that does not go away
- **A sore tongue** that is not getting better
- **Persistent hoarseness** and difficulty swallowing that is not improving

These symptoms can be caused by conditions other than head and neck cancer. However, if these symptoms are new for you or won't go away, you should contact your GP.

When should you contact a GP?

- ✓ If you notice any of the symptoms on page one.
- ✓ If symptoms persist or feel unusual for you
- ✓ If you feel worried – it's always better to check

45%

of men aged 16–44 worry about getting cancer in the future

41%

increase in head and neck cancer incidence rates since the early 1990s

46%

will survive head and neck cancer for 10 years or more

Common myths about head and neck cancer

Myth “Head and neck cancer is a single type of cancer”

Fact Head and neck cancer is a general term covering cancers that can develop in more than 30 areas of the head and neck.

Myth “Head and neck cancers aren't common, so are not worth worrying about”

Fact It's true that head and neck cancers aren't common, however, around 13,000 people are diagnosed every year in the UK.

Myth “Only older smokers get head and neck cancers”

Fact Smoking is an important risk factor for head and neck cancers

Myth “If a head or neck lump doesn't hurt, it isn't cancer”

Fact Lumps caused by many head and neck cancers can be painless in their early stages and should always be checked by a GP.

Myth “A feeling that something is stuck in the throat is a sign of head and neck cancer”

Fact While this symptom can be seen in some people, alone it is not usually a sign of head and neck cancers.

Myth “Mouthwash prevents mouth cancers”

Fact While poor oral health can be a risk factor for head and neck cancer, using mouthwash does not prevent or reverse these cancers.