



Smilow Cancer Hospital Head & Neck Cancer Screening & Prevention

Head & neck cancers begin in the cells that line surfaces of head and neck structures. They may occur in the mouth, throat, sinuses, salivary glands, and lymph nodes of the neck.

Thyroid cancers are classified as endocrine cancers not as head & neck cancer. Members of the Head and Neck Cancers Program at Smilow Cancer Hospital work closely with their colleagues in the Endocrine Cancer Program because thyroid nodules may need further evaluation by an endocrinologist or endocrine surgeon to identify if the thyroid nodule is overactive or cancerous. Most thyroid nodules are not cancers.

COMMON QUESTIONS

What is Cancer Screening?

Cancer screening is the use of medical tests to identify cancer prior to symptoms occurring. This allows a cancer to be identified in its earliest stage, when patients are more likely to have better outcomes and the opportunity for chances for cure. Screening options should be discussed with a healthcare provider.

Who needs to have cancer screening tests?

Individuals have different needs when it comes to cancer screening. Your need should be discussed with a healthcare provider who can guide you in deciding which screening tests are right for you.

Head & Neck Cancer Screening:

Currently, no studies have shown that screening for head & neck cancer saves lives. However, at Smilow Cancer Hospital and Yale Cancer Center, we believe that screening can identify head & neck cancers in patients that lead to cure. The Smilow Head & Neck Cancer team frequently receive referrals from community dentists or oral surgeons that identify suspicious lesions. All individuals should have yearly mouth and throat examinations by their dentists during routine dental visits. In addition, examination of the neck, mouth, and oropharynx by primary care physicians should be conducted at all routine physical examinations.

Thyroid Cancer Screening:

As with head & neck cancers, there are no clinically proven routine screening tests recommended for thyroid cancer. Thyroid nodules are most often not cancer and often produce no signs or symptoms. However, when identified on physical examination or by an imaging study, thyroid nodules should be evaluated with further testing, typically an ultrasound examination.

What Causes Head & Neck Cancer?

The two most common causes are:

- **Alcohol and tobacco use** (tobacco use also includes second-hand smoke and smokeless tobacco): When an individual uses both alcohol and tobacco (in any form), their risk of developing head & neck cancer is much higher than someone who uses either alcohol or tobacco alone.
- **Infection with Human Papillomavirus (HPV)**: About three quarters of oropharyngeal (throat) cancers are caused by chronic HPV infections.

Other causes include:

- **Use of Betel nut (paan)**- common in South Asia
- **Occupational exposure to certain chemicals**- e.g., asbestos, wood dust, nickel dust, or formaldehyde
- **Underlying genetic disorders**- e.g., Fanconi's anemia
- **Infection with Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV)**

What causes Thyroid Cancer?

- Most thyroid cancers are "sporadic" meaning there is no known cause
- Less frequently, exposure to large amounts of environmental radiation or some inherited syndromes are associated with an increased risk of thyroid cancer.

Who should be screened for Head & Neck Cancers?

- All adults
- High risk adult patients may be those with history of:
 - > using tobacco
 - > heavy alcohol use
 - > betel nut consumption
 - > Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infection
 - > Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) infection
 - > having multiple sexual partners

What are symptoms of Head & Neck Cancers and Thyroid Cancer?

- Symptoms of head & neck cancers may vary by location, e.g., ear pain, nasal congestion, etc.
- Common symptoms include neck masses, sores in the mouth or throat that do not heal, difficulty speaking, swallowing, or breathing.
- Thyroid cancer symptoms overlap with those of head & neck cancer and include a neck lump, voice changes, or trouble breathing.

What may reduce an individual's risk of getting Head & Neck Cancer?

- **Never start, or stop smoking.** If you smoke, talk to your doctor about getting help quitting.
- **Limit alcohol intake**
- **Practice safe sex** to avoid getting infected with HPV; if eligible, get the HPV vaccine. People up to the age of 45 are eligible to get the HPV vaccine and can discuss this with their doctors.

For more information about early detection, risks, and prevention, contact us at:

Cancer Screening and Prevention: 203-200-3030
or by email: screening@ynhh.org