



What to expect during each stage of treatment and beyond

Head and neck cancers

This information sheet tells you what you can ask for before, during and after your head or neck cancer treatment. You can ask your team for more information and support.

Working with your team means you can make sure you are getting the treatment, information and support that are right for you.

1. Your doctor visit

Your doctor should do a check up to see if they can find what is making you feel unwell. They will ask you about any symptoms you might be having (for example a lump in your neck or finding it hard to swallow).

Your doctor should work with you to make sure you have the information and help you need. You can ask your doctor about:

- What is happening in your body and why it could be happening
- What will or might happen
- How you are feeling and how to stay emotionally healthy
- Who you can talk to about getting the support you need
- Where you can get more information and support

You might have one test or a mix of tests:

Blood test

The doctor will take a sample of your blood. They will test it to see if your body is working well.

Ultrasound-guided fine-needle aspiration cytology

Sound waves are used to make a picture of the lump. The doctor uses this picture to insert needles in to the lump to collect samples. The samples are checked under a microscope. This is done under anaesthetic so you cannot feel anything.

If your doctor thinks it might be cancer they will send you to get more tests with a specialist. Your specialist is a doctor that is trained in working with people with head and neck cancers.

Your doctor should give the specialist information on your health in the past, if someone else in your family has had cancer and your test results.

You can bring a family member or friend to your visits.

You can ask your doctor for more information and support to make sure you have what you need.

2. Tests

The specialist might do more tests to see if you have a head or neck cancer. This is called a diagnosis. If you do have cancer, the tests will show how the cancer is growing or if it has spread. This is called staging.

You can ask the specialist:

- What tests you are going to have
- What will happen in the tests
- What the tests will tell you

2. Tests cont'd

You might have one test or a mix of tests:

Endoscopy

A tube with a camera on it is inserted into the nose or throat to make a picture of the head and neck.

Magnetic resonance imaging scan (MRI)

A scan where magnetic fields and radio waves are used to make a detailed picture of the body.

Position emission tomography scan (PET)

A small amount of radioactive material is injected and your whole body is scanned to show where the cancer is.

Computed tomography scan (CT scan)

Computers and x-rays are used to make a detailed picture of the head and neck.

Excisional biopsy

The lump and a small area around it will be cut out, and the area stitched up. This is called a biopsy. This sample is sent to the laboratory so they can see if it is head or neck cancer. This is done under anaesthetic so you cannot feel it.

You can ask your doctor about finding a cancer peer support group. It can help knowing that there are other people who understand what you are going through. Your friends and family can talk to a support group for carers.

3. Treatment

Your specialist should work with a team. Your team is made up of people that understand head and neck cancer.

Your team will review your test results. They should ask you what you want and need. You should work together to make the best plan for your treatment.

You can ask your team:

- What treatment you are having
- Why you are having that treatment
- What will happen in that treatment
- What the treatment will do
- When your treatment will start and how long it will take
- Risks and benefits of the treatment
- How you might feel during the treatment, side effects and what you can do to feel as well as possible
- What you can expect after the treatment

Your team should connect you to a dietitian and speech pathologist. A dietitian can give you information and support about food you can eat during and after your treatment.

A speech pathologist will test your speech or the way you talk and treat you if you have speech or swallowing problems as a side effect of treatment.

Your team might suggest you take part in a clinical trial. A clinical trial is used to test a new treatment, or to see if a treatment works better than another. You can ask for more time, or a second opinion before you decide on your treatment.

Complementary therapies include things like massage, acupuncture and meditation as well as other medicines you might take at the same time as your treatment. Some therapies might not work well with your treatment. Therefore, it is very important to talk to your team about any complementary therapies you are using, or would like to use.

You might have one treatment or a mix of treatments:

Surgery is where the cancer is cut out.

It is the most common treatment for people with head and neck cancers. This should be done by a surgeon who is very experienced at head and neck surgery.

3. Treatment

Chemotherapy or drug therapy is where drugs are used to stop the cancer growing.

It might be used before or after surgery. It can also be used if surgery is not a good option. Chemotherapy might be used alone, or with radiation therapy.

Radiation therapy or radiotherapy is where radiation is used to stop the cancer growing.

It is used for most people with head and neck cancers. It is also used if surgery is not a good

option. Radiation therapy might be used alone, or with chemotherapy.

For more information about treatment and side effects you can ask your doctor or **visit** www.cancer.org.au/about-cancer/treatment

Your team should talk to you about your needs before, during and after your treatment. You can ask for information and support at any time to make sure you have everything you need. Your team can connect you with other services and health professionals to make sure you stay physically and emotionally healthy.

4. After your treatment

After your treatment is finished, your team should give you a treatment summary. Your treatment summary has all of the information on the treatment you received:

- Tests you had to diagnose your head or neck cancer, and the results of these tests
- Treatment you had, and when you had it
- Support services and other treatment plans you received

Your team should work with you to make a plan now that your treatment is finished. You and your doctor should get a follow-up plan that includes:

- The follow-up that is best for you
- Plans for managing any side effects of treatment
- How to get help quickly if you think your cancer has come back or got worse

Your doctor should work with you and talk about:

- Finding more information and support to keep physically and emotionally healthy, and get what you need
- Signs and symptoms to look for that might mean the cancer is coming back
- Prevention and healthy living

Sometimes head and neck cancers can come back after treatment. It is usually found at a follow-up visit, or if you notice any symptoms come back.

It is important to have regular check-ups. If you notice anything different go to your doctor. You can ask your doctor for a check-up and for information and support.

5. Living with cancer

Side effects

Some people get side effects during and after their treatment. Side effects are your body responding to the treatment you are having.

They are normal, but can make you feel unwell. You might have side effects straight away, not at all, or months after your treatment.

You can talk to your doctor about your side

effects or **visit** www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/survivors/long-term-side-effects

Advance care plan

Your team might work with you to make an advance care plan. An advance care plan is a way of setting out your wishes and making sure everyone knows what you want in future medical care.

5. Living with cancer cont'd

You can talk to your doctor about making an advance care plan together or **visit** www.advancecareplanning.org.au

Palliative care

Palliative care is used at different stages of your treatment to help you feel well. Palliative care can help with pain relief, to reduce your symptoms and to improve your quality of life.

You can talk to your doctor about the type of palliative care that is best for you or **visit** www.palliativecare.org.au

Cost

There are costs at every stage of your cancer including treatment, accommodation and travel. You might have costs if you are having treatment in a private health service even if you have private health insurance.

You can talk to your team and your private health insurer if you have questions about the cost of each treatment you might have. You can also talk to the social worker at your hospital.

You can talk to your doctor about the cost of your treatment or **visit** www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/living-cancer/dealing-practical-aspects-cancer/costs-treatment

You can talk to your doctor about the cost of accommodation and travel or **visit** www.cancercouncil.com.au/get-support/practical-support-services

There are a lot of things to think about when you have head or neck cancer. There is also a lot of information and support. It is important that you do what is right for you. You can work with your team to make sure you have the best care.

Information and support

Cancer Council

- You can talk to a cancer nurse: **13 11 20**
-  If you need an interpreter: **13 14 50**

Carers Australia

- Information and support for carers: **1800 242 636**

For more information visit
www.cancerpathways.org.au



Australian Government
Cancer Australia

