

# Survey shows Americans may be missing direct route to head and neck cancer care

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Tens of thousands of Americans are diagnosed annually with head and neck cancers, but many adults are unaware of doctors who specialize in treating these conditions, according to a recent survey by the American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS), the association representing America's ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctors.

An estimated 35,000 Americans are diagnosed annually with cancers of the head and neck - which include cancers of the [oral cavity](#), larynx and pharynx - and over 7,500 died from the disease last year. While most cases are linked to tobacco and excessive alcohol use, these cancers are increasingly affecting young, non-smokers with the [human-papillomavirus](#), or HPV. Today, 25 percent of oral, head, and neck cancers - 10,000 cases each year - might be attributable to a strain of [HPV](#).

When diagnosed very early, oral, head, and neck cancers can be treated without significant complications, increasing chances of survival.

However, as the national survey found, many Americans are unaware that ENT doctors treat these cancers or are concerned about having ENT doctors treat these conditions, creating an awareness gap that could pose barriers to direct care. The survey findings include:

- Almost 6 in 10 adults were most surprised to hear ENT doctors treat head and neck cancers, and almost 7 in 10 expressed concern about having an ENT doctor treat this condition.

- While 56 percent of Americans would first go to an oncologist to discuss oral, head, and neck cancers, only 2 percent would initially approach an ENT doctor.
- Only 4 percent of Americans recognize that ENT doctors treat cancers.

Otolaryngologists, also known as ENT doctors, differ from many other physicians in that they are trained in both medicine and surgery, which means they do not need to refer patients to other physicians when ear, nose, throat, or head/neck surgery is needed and, therefore, can offer comprehensive care for each individual patient. Otolaryngologists complete up to 12 years of medical and surgical education and training to practice and can diagnose and treat a variety of medical conditions, including head and neck cancers.

"Knowledge and awareness of a head and [neck cancer](#) specialist is important for fast and accurate diagnosis and treatment," said Daniel G. Deschler, MD, chair of the AAO-HNS Head and Neck Surgery/Oncology Committee, director of the division of Head and Neck Surgery at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary and director of the Norman Knight Hyperbaric Medicine Center at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. "With thousands of Americans dying from or being diagnosed with cancers of the mouth, head, and neck each year, it is more important than ever that we educate the public about these conditions and their direct treatment options during Oral, Head, and Neck Cancer Awareness Week (OHANCAW)."

During the week-long OHANCAW campaign, free screenings are being offered at more than 150 medical centers around the country. To find out the closest free screening site, visit the Head and Neck Cancer Alliance (formerly the Yul Brynner Head and Neck Cancer Foundation)

site at [www.ohancaw.com](http://www.ohancaw.com) or [www.headandneck.org](http://www.headandneck.org).

Knowing and recognizing the signs of head and neck cancer can save lives. Symptoms can include:

- a mouth sore that bleeds easily and doesn't heal;
- a lump or thickening anywhere in your mouth or neck;
- soreness or swelling in the mouth that doesn't go away;
- prolonged hoarseness of the voice;
- a red or white patch on the tongue, gums, or cheeks that doesn't go away; and
- trouble chewing, swallowing, or moving your tongue or jaw.

The most effective prevention remains reducing unhealthy behaviors like smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and use of chewing tobacco. Unfortunately, many Americans are not aware of how preventable these cancers can be if they make minor modifications to their lifestyles and get screened annually.

Source: American Academy of Otolaryngology -- Head and Neck Surgery

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