

Examining three types of head and neck cancers

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April is Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Month, which makes this a good time to learn about three types of cancer that affect these areas of the body.

Head and neck cancers account for nearly 4% of all cancers in the U.S., according to the National Cancer Institute. These cancers are more than twice as common among men as women, and are diagnosed more often among people over 50.

Among the many types of head and neck cancers are these three:

Tonsil cancer

Tonsil cancer is an abnormal growth of cells that forms in a tonsil. Your tonsils are two oval-shaped pads in the back of your mouth that are part of your body's germ-fighting immune system. Tonsil cancer often is diagnosed late in the disease, when cancer has spread to nearby areas, such as the lymph nodes in the neck.

While it's not clear what causes tonsil cancer, [health care professionals](#) are finding that HPV is increasingly playing a role. This common sexually transmitted infection is detected in most tonsil cancers in the U.S.

Treatment for [tonsil cancer](#) can include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy and rehabilitative services. Your [health care](#) professional's recommendation for you will depend on several factors, including the size, stage and HPV status of your cancer, as well as your overall health and preferences.

Soft palate cancer

Soft palate cancer begins in the cells of the soft palate, which is located on the upper portion of the back of your mouth, behind your teeth. Soft palate cancer is considered a type of throat cancer.

Soft palate cancer forms when a genetic mutation turns normal, [healthy cells](#) into abnormal cells. Risk factors include using tobacco, drinking alcohol, infection with HPV and taking medication that suppress your immune system.

Treatment for soft palate cancer depends on many factors, such as the size and location of your cancer, your overall health, and your preferences. Treatment can include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, [reconstructive surgery](#), rehabilitative services and palliative care.

Tongue cancer

Several types of cancer can affect the tongue, but tongue cancer most often begins in the thin, flat squamous cells that line the surface of the tongue. The type of cells involved in your tongue cancer helps determine your prognosis and treatment.

Increasingly, cancers at the base of the tongue are associated with HPV, which has a profound effect on the prognosis and treatment of the cancer.

Treatment for tongue cancer typically involves surgery to remove the cancer. Chemotherapy, [radiation therapy](#) and targeted drug therapy also may be recommended. Treatment for advanced tongue cancers can impact your ability to speak and eat. Working with a skilled rehabilitation team can help you cope with changes that result from tongue cancer treatment.

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