



CANCERcare®

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# fact sheet

## AFTER A HEAD OR NECK CANCER DIAGNOSIS: QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

A diagnosis of head or neck cancer can leave you and your loved ones feeling uncertain, anxious and overwhelmed. As your health care team talks about your diagnosis and treatment, ask questions about anything you don't understand. Good communication with your doctor will help improve the quality of the care you receive. It's a good idea to bring a list of questions to the appointment and write down the doctor's responses. In addition, if possible, bring someone with you to any appointment; another set of ears can help reduce confusion.

### HERE IS A LIST OF QUESTIONS THAT YOU MAY WANT TO ASK YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM:

**Since I've been diagnosed, I've been overwhelmed. How can I better cope with my diagnosis?** A cancer diagnosis turns a person's world upside down emotionally and physically. Your team of doctors, nurses and social workers are valuable sources of support as you cope with a cancer diagnosis. Oncology social workers are licensed professionals who counsel people affected by cancer, providing emotional support and helping people access practical assistance. CancerCare's oncology social workers provide individual counseling, support groups and locate services face-to-face, online or on the telephone, free of charge. To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call 800-813-HOPE (4673).



**What type of head or neck cancer do I have?** Head and neck cancers occurs when the cells found in the head and neck begin to change and grow uncontrollably, forming a tumor (also called a nodule), which can be either cancerous or benign. These cancers can occur in the mouth, throat, voice box, salivary glands, nose or sinuses. Most head and neck cancers develop in squamous cells. These thin, flat cells form the lining of many parts of the head and neck.

**What stage is my tumor?** A tumor's stage refers to its size and extent of spread in the body—e.g., whether it has spread to lymph nodes or other organs. Cancer that has spread to other organs is called metastatic cancer. A cancer's stage is often denoted by a Roman numeral (I, II, III or IV). The higher the numeral, the more the cancer has spread within the body.

**What is my recommended treatment plan?** Depending on the information that your doctor has learned about your tumor, your treatment options may include surgery, radiation, targeted treatments and chemotherapy.

**How will my speech and swallowing be affected by my treatment plan?** Changes affect each person differently and can depend on where the tumor is located, the types of

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treatments given and the success of surgery to repair the tissues. Ask your doctor about consulting with a speech pathologist before treatment begins to measure your ability to speak and swallow. This will help other members of the health care team choose the most effective treatments that will also reduce side effects. An early evaluation will help your doctor or nurse better manage any symptoms that occur.

**Am I likely to have eating problems? Will I need a special diet?** A healthy diet is important during cancer treatment. To help you meet your nutritional goals, ask your doctor to refer you to a registered dietitian (RD). He or she can advise you on the most healthful way to eat and drink to help you manage treatment side effects.

**How can I maintain good dental health throughout treatment?** It's essential that you talk with your doctor about your dental health and visit your dentist before treatment. Your dentist can make sure that your mouth is as healthy as possible before you begin treatment and can provide important information to the rest of your health care team. Read CancerCare's "The Importance of Dental Health" fact sheet for more information.

**Should I seek a second opinion?** Usually with a new diagnosis there is a period of time, depending on the cancer type and stage, before treatment begins. During this time, getting a second opinion may help give you a peace of mind or an alternative treatment possibility. Talk to your health care team and read CancerCare's "When to Get a Second Opinion" fact sheet for more information.

**Is there a clinical trial I can participate in? If so, will it be covered by my insurance?** Clinical trials are the standard by which we measure the worth of new treatments and the quality of life of patients as they receive those treatments. For this reason, doctors and researchers urge people with cancer to take part in clinical trials. Read CancerCare's 'Clinical Trials: What You Need to Know' fact sheet to learn more information on clinical trials.



### **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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