

MAKE SMOKING HISTORY[®]

Head and Neck Cancers and Smoking

What is head and neck cancer?

Head and neck cancer (sometimes referred to as cancers of the mouth, nose and throat) is a general term referring to a range of different cancers which develop in the head and neck region. These cancers are identified by the area in which they begin.¹ These include cancers of the tongue, mouth, major salivary glands, pharynx (oropharynx, nasopharynx and hypopharynx), larynx, and the nasal cavity, middle ear and sinuses.²

How common is it?

Australia

According to 2010 data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australasian Association of Cancer Registries, head and neck cancers account for 2.62% of all diagnosed cancers in Australia. In 2007 there were 2,837 new cases of head and neck cancers. Head and neck cancer deaths account for 2.25% of all deaths from cancer. In 2007, 898 Australians died from these types of cancers.²

Western Australia

In 2010, 298 West Australians were diagnosed with head and neck cancers (220 cases in males and 78 in females)³ with 114 deaths in the same year (90 males and 24 females).⁴

What are the risk factors?

Tobacco use

Smoking is a major cause of a number of head and neck cancers including those of the tongue, mouth, pharynx and larynx.² More than 80% of all head and neck cancers occur in people who smoke tobacco.⁵ The longer a person smokes and the more tobacco they consume the greater their risk of developing these cancers.⁶

For male and female smokers, the average risk for developing oral and pharyngeal cancers is ten and five times higher, respectively, compared to lifetime non-smokers.⁶ Heavy smokers also have up to 20 times the risk of developing laryngeal cancer compared to lifetime non-smokers.⁶ Quitting smoking can significantly reduce this risk. After about five years of quitting the risk of developing oral and pharyngeal cancers is halved.⁶

Tobacco and alcohol use

Alcohol use is another major risk factor for head and neck cancers, particularly in the case of heavy drinkers. People who use both tobacco and alcohol are at greater risk of developing these cancers than those who use either tobacco or alcohol alone.⁷

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Other risk factors

There are a number of other risk factors associated with head and neck cancers, including:

- Age - with more cases occurring among people aged 55 years and older;
- Gender - with men being three times more likely than women to be diagnosed with this type of cancer;
- Race - people from some cultural backgrounds may be more like to develop some head and neck cancers;
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and Epstein-Barr Virus (EPV).⁸

In addition, the risk of developing lip cancer is increased with greater exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation.⁸

Impact on quality of life

Head and neck cancers often have a devastating impact on a person's quality of life. Treatment for these cancers can be very debilitating and may result in facial disfigurement as well as difficulties with speech, chewing and swallowing.¹ Patients may also lose some or all of their sense of smell and taste, which affects appetite. These effects can impact on self-esteem, making people feel self-conscious and deterring them from interacting socially with their peers.⁸ There is also a financial burden if the patient is unable to work during treatment.

Prevention

The best way to reduce your risk of developing head and neck cancers is to avoid the use of tobacco and alcohol.

For more information and help to quit

- For information about head and neck cancers contact the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20.
- For help to quit smoking call the Quitline on 13 7848. The Quitline offers free information, confidential counselling and a 6 session quit call-back service.
- Cancer Council Western Australia also offers *Fresh Start* quit smoking courses that are run in workplaces and the community. If you are interested in attending a course, call the Quitline or the Cancer Council Helpline to find out where courses are running. You can also access information at www.cancerwa.asn.au/prevention/tobacco/freshstart/.

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¹ National Cancer Institute. Head and Neck Cancer: Questions and Answers [Internet]. 2005 [cited 2010 August 18]. Available from: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/sites-types/head-and-neck#top>.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and Australasian Association of Cancer Registries (AACR). Cancer in Australia: an overview, 2010. Canberra (ACT): AIHW; 2010. AIHW Catalogue No.: CAN 56.

³ Western Australian Cancer Registry- Health Data Collections (unpublished data). Department of Health Western Australia. September 2011.

⁴ Western Australian Cancer Registry-Health Data Collections (unpublished data). Department of Health Western Australia. October 2011.

⁵ Cancer Council Victoria. Cancers of the mouth, nose and throat: for people with cancer, their family and friends [Internet]. 2007 [cited 2010 August 18]. Available from: http://www.cancervic.org.au/about-cancer/cancer_types/mouth_nose_and_throat_cancers.

⁶ Winstanley M. Chapter 3: The health effects of active smoking. In Scollo M and Winstanley M, editors. Tobacco in Australia: facts and issues. [Internet]. 2008 [cited 2010 August 16]. Available from: <http://www.tobaccoinaustralia.org.au/chapter-3-health-effects>.

⁷ International Agency for Research on Cancer. Tobacco smoke and involuntary smoking. IARC monographs on the evaluation of the carcinogenic risk of chemicals to humans, Volume 83. Lyon: International Agency for Research on Cancer; 2004. Available from: <http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Monographs/vol83/index.php>.

⁸ The Cancer Council New South Wales. Understanding Head and Neck Cancers: A guide for people with cancer, their families and friends [Internet]. 2008 [cited 2010 August 18]. Available from: <http://www.cancerCouncil.com.au/editorial.asp?pageid=2024>.