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If You Have Salivary Gland Cancer

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What is salivary gland cancer?

Salivary gland cancer can start in any of the salivary glands. It can have many names depending on which type of cell the cancer starts in. All of these cancers start when cells in part of a salivary gland grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. Ask your doctor to write down the exact kind of cancer you have because it can be confusing.

Cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body. Cancer cells in a salivary gland can sometimes travel to the lung and grow there. When cancer cells do this, it's called metastasis. To doctors, the cancer cells in the new place look just like the ones from the salivary gland where it started.

Cancer is always named for the place where it starts. So when salivary gland cancer spreads to the lung (or any other place), it's still called salivary gland cancer. It's not called lung cancer unless it starts from cells in the lung.

Ask your doctor to use this picture to show you where the cancer is.



Different kinds of salivary gland cancer

There are many [types of salivary gland cancers](#)¹. Your doctor can tell you more about the type you have. Most salivary gland cancers start in the parotid gland.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Why do you think I have cancer?

teeth before getting radiation treatment. Your chest might also get x-rayed to see if the cancer has spread to the lungs.

PET scan: A PET scan uses a special type of sugar that can be seen inside your body with a special camera. If there is cancer, this sugar shows up as “hot spots” where the cancer is found. This test can help show if the cancer might have spread.

Blood tests: Blood tests are not used to find cancer, but they can tell the doctor more about your overall health, like your kidney or liver function.

Nutrition and speech tests: A nutritionist might check your nutrition status before, during, and after treatment to try and keep your body weight and protein levels as normal as possible. A speech therapist might test how well you swallow and speak. After you finish treatment, they might give you exercises to help strengthen the muscles that help you eat and talk normally.

Hearing test: The chemo drug cisplatin can cause ringing in the ears or even hearing loss. You might have your hearing checked (with an audiogram) before starting treatment and your chemotherapy might be changed if your hearing is poor.

Dental exam: Your dentist will probably examine and x-ray your teeth and remove any bad teeth before any radiation is given because radiation can damage the saliva (spit) glands and cause dry mouth. Bad teeth and dry mouth can increase the chances of cavities and infection.

Questions to ask the doctor

- What tests will I need to have?
- Who will do these tests?
- Where will they be done?
- Who can explain them to me?
How and when will I get the results?

stage 1 or stage 2.

The stage describes the spread of the cancer from the place it started. It also tells if the cancer has spread to other parts of your body that are close by or farther away. Knowing the stage will help your doctor decide what type of treatment is best for you.

Your cancer can be stage 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4. The lower the number, the less the cancer has spread. A higher number, like stage 4, means a more serious cancer that has spread from where it started. Be sure to ask the doctor about the cancer stage and what it means for you.

The cancer cells in the biopsy sample will also be graded. This helps doctors predict how fast the cancer is likely to grow and spread. Cancer cells are graded based on how much they look like normal cells. Grades 1, 2, and 3 are used. Cells that look very different from normal cells are given a higher grade (3) and tend to grow faster. Ask the doctor to explain the grade of your cancer. The grade helps the doctor decide which treatment is best for you.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Do you know the stage and grade of the cancer?
- If not, how and when will you find out the stage and grade of the cancer?
- Would you explain to me what the stage and grade mean in my case?
- Based on the stage and grade of the cancer, how long do you think I'll live?
- What will happen next?

What kind of treatment will I need?

Smoking during cancer treatment is linked to more side effects, worse outcomes, and reduced benefit of treatment. It is best to stop smoking completely before starting treatment. Smoking also increases the risk of the cancer coming back after treatment as well as the risk of getting a new cancer. Quitting smoking for good is the best way to improve your chance of survival.

There are many [ways to treat salivary gland cancer](#)⁴:

- Surgery and radiation are used to treat only the cancer. They do not affect the rest of the body.
- Chemo drugs, targeted drug therapy, immunotherapy go through the whole body.

- To kill any cancer cells that may be left after surgery
- To ease problems caused by the cancer such as pain, bleeding, or trouble swallowing

Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation treatment, ask what side effects you might have. Side effects depend on the type of radiation that's used and the part of your body that's treated. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Skin changes where the radiation is given
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)
- Hoarse voice
- Taste changes
- Mouth and throat sores
- Dry mouth
- Trouble swallowing or eating
- Bone damage
- Thyroid gland damage
- Nerve damage

Your doctor may have you see a dentist before starting radiation. This is done to fix any problems with your teeth or gums that might get worse with radiation.

Most side effects get better after treatment ends and many can be managed or even prevented. Some might last longer. Ask your cancer care team what you should expect.

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Side effects of chemo

Chemo can make you feel very tired, sick to your stomach, and your hair might fall out. But most of these problems go away after treatment ends. Other side effects like hearing problems or nerve damage can last a long time.

There are ways to treat most chemo side effects. If you have side effects, tell your cancer care team so they can help.

Targeted drug therapy

[Targeted drugs](#)⁹ may be used to treat salivary gland cancer. These drugs affect mainly cancer cells and not normal cells in the body. They may work even if other treatments don't. These drugs have different side effects from chemo.

Side effects of targeted drug therapy

Side effects of targeted drug therapy depend on which drug is used. There are ways to treat most of the side effects caused by targeted therapy and they usually go away after treatment ends.

If you have side effects, talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

Immunotherapy

[Immunotherapy](#)¹⁰ is treatment that either boosts your own immune system or uses man-made versions of parts of the immune system that attack the cancer cells. Immunotherapy drugs may be given into a vein.

Side effects of immunotherapy

Immunotherapy can cause many different side effects depending on which drug is used. These drugs can cause you to feel tired, have a cough, feel sick to your stomach, have a skin rash, poor appetite, constipation, and diarrhea. Most of these problems go away after treatment ends.

More serious side effects might happen if the immune system starts attacking normal parts of the body, which can cause problems in many organs. You may need to stop the immunotherapy drug and take steroids to treat this side effect.

There are ways to treat most of the side effects caused by immunotherapy. If you have

side effects, talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that test new drugs or other treatments in people. They compare standard treatments with others that may be better.

If you would like to learn more about clinical trials, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital takes conducts clinical trials. See [Clinical Trials¹¹](#) to learn more.

Clinical trials help doctors find better ways to treat cancer. If your doctor can find one that's studying the kind of cancer you have, it's up to you whether to take part. And if you do sign up for a clinical trial, you can always stop at any time.

What about other treatments that I hear about?

When you have cancer you might hear about _____

- How soon do I need to start treatment?
- What should I do to be ready for treatment?
- Is there anything I can do to help the treatment work better?
- What's the next step?

How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at www.cancer.org¹⁴. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

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