

Salivary Gland Cancer

What is salivary gland cancer?

Salivary gland cancer is cancer in the glands that make saliva (spit). Saliva moistens the mouth and helps dissolve food. Large clusters of salivary glands are under the tongue, on the sides of the face just in front of the ears, and under the jawbone. Smaller clusters are found in other parts of the upper digestive system.

What are the signs?

These are signs of salivary gland cancer:

- Swelling under the chin or around the jawbone
- Swelling or lump in front of or below the ear
- Numbness or paralysis of muscles in the face
- Pain in the face, chin, or neck that does not go away

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine you and feel for lumps in your throat, neck, and mouth. Doctors may also take some images of your head with a CT (computed tomography) or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan. If abnormal tissue is found, the doctor may remove a small piece. This is called a biopsy. Doctors look at the biopsy under a microscope to check for cancer cells.

What is staging?

If the biopsy shows cancer cells, you will have more tests to find out if cancer has spread to other parts of the body. This is called staging. It helps your cancer care team plan the best treatment.

Salivary gland cancers are also classified by grade. This tells how fast the cancer cells are growing. Low-grade cancers grow more slowly. High-grade cancers grow more quickly.

Recurrent

Cancer that comes back after it has been treated is called recurrent. It may come back in the salivary glands or in another part of the body.

How is it treated?

Doctors use three main types of treatment after they have staged your cancer: surgery, radiation therapy, and sometimes, chemotherapy.

Surgery. Your cancer care doctor may use surgery to cut out the cancer and tissue around it. This depends on where the cancer is and how far it has spread. If the cancer has spread to lymph nodes in the neck, your doctor may remove them, too.

Radiation therapy. Radiation therapy uses high-energy beams to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. Radiation may come from a machine or from placing a radiation source inside the body near the cancer.

Chemotherapy. Chemotherapy is medicines that kill cancer cells. It may be taken by pill or injected into the bloodstream.

Will treatment leave permanent changes?

Treatment may leave some permanent changes on the face. If necessary, your cancer care team will use surgery or a facial prosthesis to restore function and appearance. Talk with your cancer care team about this before your surgery. Huntsman Cancer Institute's Facial Prosthetics Service can work with your surgeon to make a realistic prosthesis.

The social workers at Huntsman Cancer Institute can help you cope with cancer treatment and its side effects. For more information, call 801-213-5699.

The Linda B. and Robert B. Wiggins Wellness and Integrative Health Center has programs and services to help your quality of life during and after treatment. For more information, call 801-587-4585.