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
• 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.

Stages of Salivary Gland Cancer
Stage I. The cancer is 2 centimeters (the size of a shelled peanut) or less in diameter and has not spread outside the salivary glands.
Stage II. The cancer is larger than 2 centimeters but no more than 4 centimeters (the size of a walnut) in diameter. It has not spread outside the salivary glands.
Stage III. Any of the following may be true:
• The cancer is smaller than 4 centimeters in diameter. It has spread to a single lymph node.
• The cancer is larger than 4 centimeters in diameter. It has spread into the skin, soft tissue, bone, or nerve around the gland. The cancer may have spread to a single lymph node.
Stage IV. Any of the following may be true:
• The cancer is very large.
• The cancer has spread into other tissues of the neck.
• The cancer has spread into more than one lymph node of the neck or into other parts of the body.

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: 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.

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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.

What type of treatment will I need?
You and your cancer care team will plan your treatment depending on the stage and grade of the cancer.

Stage I. For both low- and high-grade stage I cancers, doctors use surgery or radiation therapy.

Stage II. For both low- and high-grade stage II cancers, doctors use surgery. Radiation therapy may follow. The doctor may recommend chemotherapy if a low-grade cancer does not respond to surgery or radiation. Specialized radiation therapy may be the treatment for some high-grade cancers.

Stage III. For stage III cancer, the treatment options are similar to those for stage II cancers.

Stage IV. For stage IV cancer, the treatment may be specialized radiation therapy, or chemotherapy with or without radiation therapy.

Recurrent. In recurrent salivary gland cancers, the treatment depends on several things:
- Type of cancer
- Where the cancer came back
- Previous treatment
- Your general health

Your cancer care team may recommend specialized radiation therapy or chemotherapy.

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.