

Knowing the Signs of Head and Neck Cancer

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ROCKFORD - While cancers such as breast, lung, and colon may get more public attention, head and neck cancer is certainly nothing to ignore. April is Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Month, designed to put a spotlight on head and neck cancer, its causes, and symptoms.

According to the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), more than 66,000 people will develop head and neck cancer this year, and more than 14,000 will die from this type of cancer.

“Head and neck cancer is not a very common cancer but it still comprises about five percent of all cancers in the United States,” says Dr. Iftekhar Ahmad, Radiation Oncologist, OSF HealthCare. “It is primarily due to tobacco use, smoking, and other forms of tobacco and alcohol. It is much easier to treat – you have a better prognosis – if it’s caught early so you want to be vigilant and aware of changes in this region – if it’s your voice, a sore, a lump in your neck, or things like that.”

According to Dr. Ahmad, head and neck cancer is any cancer that is between the collarbone and eyes. Head and neck cancers include the oral cavity (lips, tongue, gums), larynx (voice box), sinuses and nasal cavity, and salivary glands.

“The symptoms can vary depending on the actual location, so even though this head and neck region is not a very big area it manifests very differently meaning larynx cancer will many times manifest as voice changes whereas throat cancer will show up as pain, coughing, difficulty swallowing, sometimes ear pain can be a symptom of certain head and neck cancers,” says Dr. Ahmad. “So it really depends on what area.”

According to the National Cancer Institute, about 75 percent of head and neck cancers are caused by tobacco and alcohol use. People who use both tobacco and alcohol are at a greater risk of developing head and neck cancer than those who use either tobacco or alcohol alone. According to Dr. Ahmad, dental hygiene is another factor when it comes to these types of cancers.

“Because 20 to 25 percent of cancers that aren’t caused by tobacco or alcohol use or viral related, sometimes it’s from poor oral hygiene,” says Dr. Ahmad. “You want to go to your dentist regularly, brush and floss regularly, take care of your gums and also to that end if you notice issues to your mouth or your teeth, bleeding gums or a sore on your tongue or something like that, show it to your dentist.”

Treatment options for head and neck cancer include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy or a combination of treatments. Many times a treatment plan depends on factors such as the location of the tumor, the stage of cancer, and the patient’s age and overall health.

While things such as pain when swallowing, ear pain or hoarseness may not be serious, Dr. Ahmad says it’s important to pay attention to any symptoms and seek help if your problems persist.

“The main take home point is you know your body the best,” he adds. “If you’re having an issue that is abnormal to you or that’s not getting better you at least need to have your physician be aware of it to take the necessary steps.”

For more information on cancer services, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).