

Rise in head and neck cancer spurs innovations in care

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Incidence of head and neck cancers - usually defined as malignancies above the collarbone but outside the brain - are on the rise, according to statistics from the American Cancer Society (ACS). The most common is thyroid cancer, with more than 62,000 cases annually.

Other [head](#) and neck cancers, including tumors of the mouth, tongue, throat, vocal cords, and salivary glands, account for about 3 percent of all new cancer diagnosis in the U.S. This year, more than 61,000 new cases will be diagnosed.

According to the ACS, the primary causes of most head and neck cancers, which are more common in men than women, are: alcohol and tobacco use, and exposure to HPV, the same virus that increases a woman's risk of cervical cancer.

"In the past decade, we've seen an epidemic rise in cancers in the back of the throat, specifically in the tonsils and the base of the tongue - most which are related to HPV," says Dr. Geoffrey Young, a head and neck surgeon in the Department of Otorhinolaryngology on Mayo Clinic's Florida campus.

The growing number of cases, coupled with advancements in technology and [treatment options](#), has "created a new paradigm in caring for these [patients](#), as they usually require multiple subspecialists coordinating care over weeks and months," says Young.

NEW TREATMENT OPTIONS

To help streamline the care process, Mayo Clinic's campus in Florida recently launched a Multidisciplinary Head and Neck Cancer Clinic, offering patients a single point of entry into Mayo Clinic's Cancer Center. The new clinic provides a coordinated approach to specialty care, including surgical oncology, medical oncology, radiation oncology, neuro-radiology and pathology.

In recent years, advances in minimally invasive robotic surgery, mean patients suffering from [throat cancers](#), in particular, have more treatment options. "We now have the opportunity, thanks to advances in [robotic surgery](#) and minimally invasive techniques, to treat patients who previously were not candidates for surgery," says Young.

In addition, research has also led to advances in chemotherapy and immunotherapy.

The value of the new multidisciplinary clinic, in addition to convenience, says Dr. Young, is that patients have the opportunity to learn about all the available treatment options and make real-time decisions with the entire team of experts.

"In a single office visit, patients have a full analysis with all of the providers. And at the end of the 45 minutes, they have a comprehensive treatment plan individualized to them so they can immediately begin treatment," explains Young.

SEEKING EXPERTISE

Diagnosing head and neck cancers can be challenging, since many do not have symptoms until they are in the later stages. As such, Young recommends seeking out medical advice for any changes or pain in the

mouth, throat, or neck.

"The most common misconception is that these cancers cannot be cured. With the right treatment, many patients can return to a normal quality of life," says Young.

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