

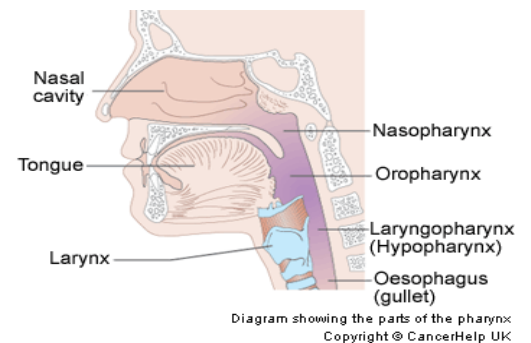
About Nasopharyngeal Cancer - A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of the information on 'About nasopharyngeal cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

In this information there are sections on

- What is the nasopharynx?
- Risks and causes of nasopharyngeal cancer
- Symptoms of nasopharyngeal cancer
- Nasopharyngeal cancer screening
- Types of nasopharyngeal cancer
- Should I see a nasopharyngeal cancer specialist?
- What to ask your doctor about nasopharyngeal cancer



the hypopharynx (near your voice box – the larynx). There is information about cancer of the oropharynx in the mouth and oropharyngeal cancer section of CancerHelp UK. And there is information about cancer of the hypopharynx in the cancer of the larynx section of CancerHelp UK.

What is the nasopharynx?

Parts of the pharynx

The pharynx is the medical name for the throat. The pharynx is in 3 parts, and the nasopharynx is one of these parts. The nasopharynx is the part of the throat that connects to your nose. Cancer that develops in the nasopharynx is called nasopharyngeal cancer.

The two other parts of the pharynx are the oropharynx (just behind your mouth) and

What throat cancer means

People sometimes use the words throat cancer to describe cancer that develops in any of the 3 parts of the pharynx. Throat cancer is also sometimes used to describe cancer of the thyroid gland, the voice box (larynx) or the gullet (oesophagus). To avoid confusion, it is important to know the exact medical name of the cancer you have so that you can find the right information.



Lymph nodes in your neck

Lymph nodes are small, bean shaped glands that are part of the lymphatic system. There are major groups of lymph nodes in the neck. Cancers that start in the nasopharynx can spread to these lymph nodes.

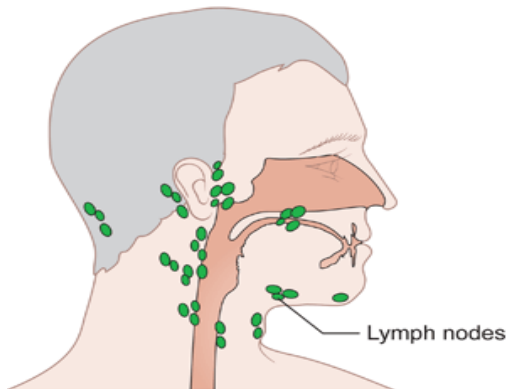


Diagram showing the lymph nodes in the head and neck
Copyright © CancerHelp UK

Risks and causes of nasopharyngeal cancer

Cancers of the nasopharynx are very rare in the UK. We don't know exactly what causes most nasopharyngeal cancers, but we do know of several risk factors.

Known risk factors

- Diet - poor diet may increase your risk and we know that nasopharyngeal cancer is more common in communities where people eat a lot of cured, salted or pickled foods
- Viruses - nasopharyngeal cancers have been linked to the Epstein Barr virus (EBV). But most people carry EBV and it does them no harm
- Family history - risk is higher in people with a close relative who has had nasopharyngeal cancer, especially if the relative was under 40
- Expose to wood dust - people exposed through their work have an increased risk, but we don't know which chemicals in treated wood cause this
- Chronic ear, nose and throat disease - this includes chronic blocked and runny nose (rhinitis), middle ear infections (otitis media), and polyps
- Smoking - risk is up to 3 times higher in people who are long term smokers (25 years or more) than people who don't smoke

Unlike most other types of head and neck cancer, alcohol is not a known risk factor for nasopharyngeal cancer.

Symptoms of nasopharyngeal cancer

Some people with nasopharyngeal cancer have no symptoms at all. But it is important that you report any of the following symptoms to your doctor if they carry on for longer than 3 weeks.

- A lump or growth anywhere in the neck area that does not go away after 3 weeks (this may be the only sign you have)
- Hearing loss – usually on one side only
- Tinnitus
- Fluid collection in the ear
- Blocked or stuffy nose – particularly if only blocked on one side
- Blood stained discharge from the nose
- Headache
- Numbness of the lower part of your face
- Difficulty with swallowing
- Changes in voice – such as hoarseness



If the cancer has spread into the nerves that control eye movement then you might also have double vision.

Remember – less serious conditions may cause many of these symptoms. Most people with these symptoms will not have nasopharyngeal cancer. But it is always important to check with your GP. If your GP suspects your symptoms could be because of nasopharyngeal cancer he or she will refer you to a specialist.

Nasopharyngeal cancer screening

Screening means testing people for early signs of a disease before they have any symptoms. If there is no accurate screening test available for a type of cancer, it isn't possible to carry out screening. An accurate test must be reliable at picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer.

There is no national screening programme in the UK for nasopharyngeal cancers. These cancers are rare in the UK. It would be very expensive to screen everyone for a disease that affects a small number of people. With uncommon diseases, it is most cost effective to screen people who are thought to be at a higher risk. But first we must be sure we know who is at higher risk.

Types of nasopharyngeal cancer

Several layers of tissue make up the nasopharynx, each containing many different types of cells. Different cancers can develop from each cell type. It is important for doctors to recognise these differences. They help doctors decide what is the best way to treat that particular type of cancer. Tumours of the nasopharynx can be non

cancerous (benign), or cancerous (malignant).

Squamous cell cancers

Most nasopharyngeal cancers are squamous cell carcinomas. Squamous cells are the flat, skin like cells that line the inside of your mouth, nose, larynx and throat. Carcinoma means cancer. So squamous cell carcinoma is cancer that starts in these cells. There are 3 different types of squamous cell cancers, and they are treated in similar ways.

Other types of nasopharyngeal cancer

Other types of nasopharyngeal cancer are more rare and include adenocarcinomas, adenoid cystic carcinomas, lymphomas, melanomas and sarcomas. If you are looking for information on any of these types of cancer, this is not the right section for you. You need to go to the section that is about the type of cancer you have.

Grade and nasopharyngeal cancers

Cancer cells can be graded according to how abnormal they look under the microscope. The more abnormal the cells look, the higher the grade. The highest grade nasopharyngeal cancers respond well to treatment and tend to do better than other types.

Should I see a nasopharyngeal cancer specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who to refer to a specialist. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has produced guidelines for GPs to help them decide which patients need to be seen urgently by a specialist.



Urgent referral guidelines

You should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks if you have

- Unexplained red and white patches in your mouth that are painful, swollen or bleeding
- Unexplained ulceration (an area that is red and sore) or a lump in your mouth for more than 3 weeks
- An unexplained lump in your neck that is new or has changed in the previous 3 to 6 weeks
- Unexplained swelling in the glands under your ear, or around your lower jaw, that does not go away
- Unexplained pain on one side of your head and neck for more than 4 weeks, with earache, for no apparent reason
- An unexplained sore or painful throat that has lasted longer than it should

If you have a loose tooth for more than 3 weeks for no apparent reason, your doctor may want to refer you to a dentist urgently.

The guidelines also say the GP should send you for an urgent chest X-ray if you have had a hoarse, husky or quieter than normal voice for more than 3 weeks – particularly if you are a smoker over the age of 50, or a heavy drinker.

What to do if you are concerned

If you are worried your GP isn't taking your symptoms as seriously as you think they should, you could print this page, and take it along to your appointment.

What to ask your doctor about nasopharyngeal cancer

- Am I more likely to get cancer of the nasopharynx than anyone else?
- How will I know if I have cancer of the nasopharynx?
- Will my diet increase my risk of nasopharyngeal cancer?
- Can I have screening for nasopharyngeal cancer?
- Do cancers of the nasopharynx run in families?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk of nasopharyngeal cancer?



Notes

More information

For more information about nasopharyngeal cancer, visit our website

<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in August 2011. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2011. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).