Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Head and Neck Cancer: Moving to Life After Treatment

Congratulations on completing your treatment for head and neck cancer! Your next step is post-treatment care. This resource explains what happens over the next few years.

The first 24 months (2 years) after treatment

When your treatment is done, your head and neck care team will follow you closely as you recover from side effects. After you recover, you'll keep seeing them on a regular schedule every few months for cancer surveillance. During this post-treatment period, please talk with your care team if you have concerns about your health.

During this period, it's important to see your primary care provider for routine care. If you don't have a primary care provider, we encourage you to find one. You should see your dentist for regular dental cleaning. You should also do jaw and neck stretching exercise every day.

If you had radiation treatments, see your dentist for regular dental cleaning every 3 to 4 months. If they recommend extraction or implants, call your radiation oncology team or MSK dental team. You'll need to get clearance before having either of these procedures.

You'll have follow-up visits with your primary cancer treatment team for the first 24 months after your cancer treatment ends. This is the date you finish radiation. Your treatment team includes your surgeon, radiation oncologist, medical oncologist, nurse practitioner (NP), and physician's assistant (PA). You may see different team members at each visit.

During these visits, you'll have:

- Physical exam (oral and neck exam).
- Flexible endoscopy, if your doctor orders it.
- PET scan, MRI, or CT scan, if your doctor orders it. They'll decide how often to repeat the scan.
- Toxicity check.
- Thyroid lab tests, if you had radiation to the neck.

Starting 24 months (2 years) to 5 years after treatment

Your risk of cancer coming back decreases 24 months after your treatment. We call this the long-term phase. Our head and neck long-term and Survivorship providers will care for you during this time. You'll have care and survivorship clinic visits that will help you maintain a healthy, good quality of life.

During this time, we'll:

- Screen for cancer that came back and any new cancers of the head and neck.
- Manage long-term side effects of your treatment.
- Screen for other cancers and health problems.

You'll have follow-up visits with your care team every 6 months for the next few years. During these visits, you'll have:

- A physical exam.
- Flexible endoscopy, if your doctor orders it.
- Thyroid lab tests, if you had radiation to the neck.
- Toxicity check.

Starting 60 months (5 years) after treatment

Starting 5 years after your treatment, you'll have follow-up visits with your care team every 12 months (once a year).

During these visits, you'll have:

- Exam.
- Flexible endoscopy, if your doctor orders it.
- Thyroid lab tests, if you had radiation to the neck.
- Disease-specific testing, as needed.
- Carotid ultrasound.
- Review lung screening eligibility.
- Toxicity check.

Lung cancer screening

You need a lung cancer screening (CT scan of your chest) if you:

- Are age 50 years or older.
- Have smoked an average of:
  - 1 pack of cigarettes a day for 20 years.
  - A similar amount (2 packs a day for 10 years).

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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