



Larynx Cancer/ Voicebox Cancer

Causes

Cancer is caused by the uncontrolled growth of cells that form a tumor. This tumor may have the ability to invade nearby tissues or spread (metastasize). Cancer in the voicebox, just like most other cancers, can form when one or more normal cells develops mutations in the genes that control growth and survival. Voicebox cancer is almost always associated with exposure to carcinogens, like those found in cigarette smoke. Most patients are current or former smokers. Some tonsil cancers are caused by a chronic human papillomavirus (HPV) infection, but there is no evidence that HPV causes voicebox cancer. Your doctor won't test your cancer for HPV because it does not make a difference for treatment or chance of cure.

Symptoms, Signs, and Diagnosis

Most voicebox cancer begins in the vocal folds, or the part of your voicebox that produces sound when you speak. This will very likely cause voice changes, even if the cancer is very small. Anyone with unexplained voice changes that last more than a couple weeks should be examined. Early examination by an Ear, Nose and Throat doctor could lead to the diagnosis of an early, small voicebox cancer. These early, small cancers are very curable. When voicebox cancer starts somewhere other than the vocal folds, sometimes it can grow large before symptoms are noticed. These symptoms may include throat pain, painful swallowing, difficulty swallowing, and ear pain. Voicebox problems can cause ear pain because branches of the same nerve control sensation in the voicebox and ear. Not all voicebox cancers spread, but ones that do spread tend to do so into the neck lymph nodes. This could cause a neck lump.

Diagnosis includes examination by an Ear, Nose or Throat doctor. This will include a scope examination to look at the throat and voicebox. If a suspicious mass is seen, a biopsy will need to be done for diagnosis. If cancer is diagnosed, your workup may include CT scans, MRI scans or PET scans to determine how large the cancer is and if there has been spread to any other parts of your body. All of this information helps your doctor determine the "stage" of the cancer.

Treatment

Treatment of voicebox cancer depends on the stage that has been determined by physical exams and scans. Early stage voicebox cancer is treated with one treatment, such as surgery or radiation. You may have office visits with both your Ear, Nose and Throat doctor and Radiation Oncology doctor to learn about the risks and benefits of both of these options. Early stage voicebox cancer is highly treatable, and cure with either surgery or radiation is the expectation.

If you have more advanced stage voicebox cancer, multiple different treatments will be used to treat your cancer. This could include surgery, followed by radiation with or without chemotherapy, or combination chemotherapy and radiation without surgery. In this case, you would meet with your Ear, Nose and Throat doctor, a Radiation Oncology doctor, and a Medical Oncology doctor who gives the chemotherapy. Although aggressive treatment with the intent to cure is still given, the chance of cure is lower with advanced stage voicebox cancer. If your treatment fails, or if your cancer comes back after treatment, immunotherapy with medicines designed to activate your immune system to fight the cancer may be available.