

UW Health: Experts urge head and neck cancer screenings

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MADISON, Wis. – About 4% of cancers diagnosed in the U.S. each year, roughly 66,000 cases, are classified as head and neck cancer. Most are very treatable, especially when found in early stages.

However, according to Dr. Tiffany Glazer, head and neck cancer surgeon, UW Health, and assistant professor of surgery, UW School of Medicine and Public Health, recently patients coming in for head and neck cancer treatment are presenting with more severe cases and at later stages.

“Patients are often referred to head and neck cancer experts by primary care physicians or dentists because those providers notice early signs,” Glazer said. “But unfortunately, those appointments were delayed or reduced by the pandemic.”

Dentists commonly perform oral health screenings during check-ups. Patients can also consult ear, nose and throat specialists about concerning symptoms and preventative screenings.

Experts also point out the unique challenges associated with the physical location of these tumors, which can make head and neck cancer a frightening prospect for patients. The disease can affect a patient’s appearance, their ability to speak, swallow and breathe normally.

“Of all cancer types, head and neck cancer can be among the most feared by patients, simply based on the critical location involving the mouth, throat, face and neck,” said Dr. Paul Harari, oncologist, UW Health, chair of the Department of Human Oncology at UW School of Medicine and Public Health, and principal investigator for the [Wisconsin Head and Neck Cancer Specialized Programs of](#)

[Research Excellence \(SPORE\)](#). “These cancers can be challenging, and the treatments require an experienced multi-disciplinary team of experts.”

[Head and neck cancer](#) is a broad term that covers cancers that occur in the areas of the throat, voice box, nose, sinuses, mouth, and skin.

Glazer noted risk factors for developing head and neck cancer include alcohol and tobacco use.

“We’ve also seen a trend in the last several years of head and neck cancer stemming from human papillomavirus or HPV,” she said. “That’s why I encourage everyone with young kids to get them vaccinated against HPV. It’s a remarkable vaccine that can reduce the risk of several cancers.”

Symptoms of head and neck cancer can include a neck mass, pain and functional issues with speech, swallowing and breathing. In the mouth, people may notice bleeding, loose teeth, jaw irregularities, and white or red patches along the gums, tongue or mouth lining.

Once a patient is diagnosed, they meet with an oncology team to consider options such as surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or some combination of these treatments.

Glazer also noted that surgeons and care teams recognize a patient might be too embarrassed to bring up concerns about physical appearance during treatment.

“Reconstruction is an important aspect of cancer removal surgery,” Glazer said. “Surgeons prioritize using tissue from similar areas to match color and texture as much as possible, for example.”

At UW Health, where specialists perform a high volume of complex head and neck cancer surgeries and reconstructions, patients meet with their oncologists for five years after successful treatments, to monitor for any evidence of recurrence. As patients heal, there can be additional work done to address scars and improve functional needs.

Read more about the [ongoing head and neck cancer research in Wisconsin](#).

A pre-recorded interview with Glazer is available.