# Understanding the Different Types of Throat Cancer

by PAULA CLARK

## Types of Throat Cancer

If you grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, then you may remember a public service announcement where a woman warned kids to stop smoking. Her voice sounded robotic because she had to press a device to her neck to speak.

This is one of the more extreme impacts of throat cancer and it shows us how important the throat is; it has a lot of jobs to do, like breathing, swallowing, speaking, and if you are lucky to be blessed with a lovely voice, singing. However, there are different types of throat cancer to be aware of.

When someone says “throat cancer” they can be talking about more than one diagnosis. Before I narrow it down, let’s talk about what throat cancer is and isn't.

### What Isn’t Throat Cancer?

In medical terms, the throat is known as the pharynx. You’ll find this term or something like it in the names of different types of throat cancer. You’ll notice the types of head and neck cancer do not include the term “pharynx,” which means they are not related specifically to the throat. It’s still helpful to know about them because some (like esophageal cancer) can spread from throat cancer.

These head and neck cancers are not related to the throat:

- Esophageal cancer
- Nasal or parasinus cancer
- Thyroid cancer
- Parathyroid gland cancer
- Salivary gland cancer

### What Are the Types of Throat Cancer?

There are different types of throat cancer that can be diagnosed; it isn't just one single condition. It's important to understand what part of your throat is being affected in order to start treatment.

#### Laryngeal Cancer

The larynx is the “tube that connects the throat to your windpipe (trachea).”

Your larynx is where you will find your vocal chords and the epiglottis, which is a leaf-shaped flap that prevents food and fluid from entering your trachea (going down the wrong pipe).

A number of different cancers can develop in the larynx, but the most common is squamous cell carcinoma.

Others include “minor salivary gland cancers, sarcomas, melanomas and lymphomas.” The five-year survival rate of laryngeal cancer is 60%.

**Nasopharyngeal Cancer**

Nasopharyngeal cancer occurs at the top of the pharynx, which is at the back of the nose. The most common type starts in the epithelial cells lining the inside of the nasopharynx, but rare cancers called nasopharyngeal papillary adenocarcinoma and minor salivary gland carcinoma can also occur. The five-year survival rate of nasopharyngeal cancer is 61%.

**Oropharynx**

Moving down the throat, we land in the oropharynx at the back of the mouth.

Because of its proximity to the mouth, it is sometimes called oral cancer and causes cancer in your soft palate (the part of the throat behind the mouth, your tonsils and the base of the tongue). Like nasopharyngeal cancer, the most common type is squamous cell carcinoma.

**Hypopharynx**

At the bottom of the throat you will find your hypopharynx, which connects your pharynx to your esophagus. Cancer of the hypopharynx is rare, but the most common type is squamous cell carcinoma.

Cancer of the hypopharynx is often found at a later stage due to its location in the throat. Its five-year survival rate is 59% if found early in a localized state. Unfortunately, the five-year survival rate is 32% if found later.

**Risk Factors for Throat Cancer**

The incidence of some throat cancers is dropping, likely due to successful anti-smoking campaigns that have encouraged people to quit for good. (I bet the lady from the 1980s PSA would be glad to hear this).

The group at the highest risk are men over the age of 65, but everyone should aware of the potential risk factors:

- Smoking tobacco
- Drinking alcohol
- Smoking and drinking together
- HPV infection (particularly in the oropharynx)
- Chronic acid reflux

**How Would I Know if I Have Throat Cancer?**

It can start with something as benign as an earache, like it does in some cases.

The most common symptoms are:

- Hoarse voice for three to four weeks
- Difficulty swallowing
- An unexplained neck lump

Less common symptoms:

- Ear pain or a sore throat
- Unexplained weight loss
- Persistent cough (especially if you are coughing up blood)
- Shortness of breath

## Treatment Options

As with other cancers, throat cancer is treated with chemo, surgery, and radiation.

Often, the first strategy is to surgically remove the tumor and follow up with radiation and chemotherapy. Other surgeries may be needed to ensure a patient can still breathe and eat if the cancer is hampering those functions, like a tracheostomy or inserting a gastronomy tube.

Other treatments include immunotherapy (which helps boost the immune system) and targeted therapy (which targets specific genes).

The side effects of the treatment are particularly concerning to patients because the throat is such an important part of our body. Patients may experience swelling, impaired speech or permanent loss of their voice, problems with chewing or swallowing, and facial disfigurement. Surgery can also affect other parts of the neck, like the thyroid gland, and can require patients to need hormone replacement.

## How to Stay Healthy

The most impactful thing you can do today to prevent throat cancer is to quit smoking, especially if you also drink. If you want to avoid becoming next year’s public service announcement, it is your best chance.