

Education

Cancer of the Larynx (Voice Box)

Cancer of the larynx (voice box) is a malignant (life-threatening) tumor in your larynx. If not treated, it can spread throughout the throat and block your air passage. It may spread to the lymph nodes in your neck and then to other parts of your body.

Laryngeal cancer can usually be cured if detected in its early stages. Most cases of laryngeal cancer occur in people who have been smokers.

How does it occur?

The exact cause of laryngeal cancer is not known, but it is most common among people who smoke heavily and drink large amounts of alcohol.

What are the symptoms?

Often the only early symptom of laryngeal cancer is hoarseness that is continuous and worsens over time. Usually there are no cold or flulike symptoms and no pain with the hoarseness.

The following symptoms may occur in advanced stages:

- chronic cough
- trouble breathing and swallowing
- coughing up blood
- pain
- an obvious lump in the neck.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and will examine your throat. To gain more information, your provider may recommend the following:

- Examination of your larynx either indirectly using mirrors or directly using a special viewing tube (laryngoscope). For a laryngoscopic exam, you will be put to sleep with a general anesthetic.
- A biopsy of the affected area of your larynx or vocal cords (removal of a small tissue sample) for examination and tests. A biopsy is done at the time of a laryngoscopic exam, usually under anesthesia. The biopsy will show whether a growth is benign, premalignant, or malignant.

What is the treatment?

Your health care provider will treat cancer of the larynx based on the stage, or extent, of the disease when it is diagnosed. The cancer may be completely cured if treatment begins in the early stages of the cancer. Your provider may recommend that you have a combination of the following treatments:

- radiation therapy
- chemotherapy (anticancer drugs) to destroy cancer cells, reduce the size of the tumor, and possibly allow you to keep your voice box
- surgery to remove the tumor and all or part of your larynx.

Radiation alone is successful in curing 85% of laryngeal cancers in the early stages.

If your larynx is removed, you will need speech therapy to learn new ways to speak. A laryngectomee is a person who has had the larynx surgically removed and so has permanently lost the ability to speak normally. You can expect to live a healthy,

productive life and will learn to speak in new ways, such as the following:

- having a one-way valve implanted between your esophagus and airway to allow air for speech to enter your mouth
- using an electromechanical device to cause a vibration that produces sound that you can shape into words with your tongue, cheeks, lips, and teeth
- learning to use your esophagus instead of your larynx by swallowing air and bringing the air back into your mouth for speech.

How long will the effects last?

The effects of cancer of the larynx depend on the stage of the tumor when it is detected and the treatment. Your age and physical condition are important factors as well. Some treatments are not recommended for people in frail health or who do not stop heavy use of cigarettes or alcohol.

How can I take care of myself?

Ask about side effects you may have from surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy. Talk to your health care provider about any concerns you have regarding the course of your illness and treatments. You may want to make a list of questions at home and take it with you when you visit your provider. Ask a family member or friend to go with you who can listen, too. If you don't understand a word or concept, ask your provider to explain it. Take notes if you need to.

In addition, follow these guidelines:

- Keep eating a healthy diet during treatment. Eat frequent meals and liquid food supplements. This will help you avoid losing weight if your throat becomes sore during treatment.
- Avoid using tobacco in any form.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.
- Complete the full course of surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy treatments your health care provider orders.
- Keep all follow-up appointments with your provider.
- If possible, join a cancer support group during your illness and recovery.
- Maintain a hopeful and positive outlook throughout your treatment and recovery.
- Eat well-balanced meals that are low in fat and high in fiber, exercise regularly, and observe overall good health practices.

For more information on cancer and laryngectomees, contact:

- American Cancer Society, Inc. Phone: 800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345) Web site: <http://www.cancer.org>
- AMC Cancer Research Center and Foundation Phone: 800-525-3777 Web site: <http://www.amc.org>
- Cancer Information Service Phone: 800-4-CANCER (800-422-6237) Web site: <http://cis.nci.nih.gov>
- The International Association of Laryngectomees Phone: 866-425-3678 Web site: <http://www.larynxlink.com>.

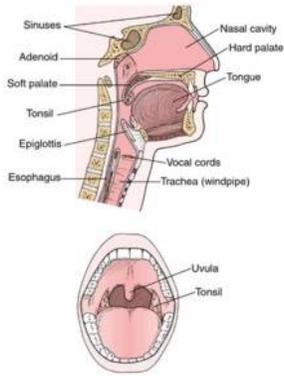
What can be done to help prevent cancer of the larynx from spreading or recurring?

You may be able to reduce the risk of spread or recurrence of cancer of the larynx by:

- completing the full course of surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy treatments ordered by your health care provider
- avoiding use of all tobacco products
- avoiding heavy use of alcohol
- seeing your health care provider right away if your voice changes, you notice a return of any previous symptoms, or you develop new symptoms.

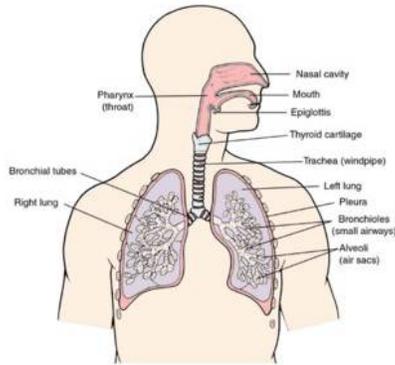
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Head and Throat



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Respiratory System



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