Glossary of Medical Terms for Head & Neck Cancer

**Adjuvant therapy:** Treatment given following the primary treatment to increase the effectiveness of the primary treatment. Adjuvant therapy may be chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or hormone therapy.

**Adverse event:** A toxicity or undesirable effect, usually of treatment.

**Adenocarcinoma:** Cancer that begins in cell that line certain internal organs and that have glandular (secretory) properties.

**Adenoidcystic carcinoma:** A rare type of cancer that usually begins in the salivary glands.

**Aspiration:** Removal of fluid from a lump, often a cyst, with a needle and syringe.

**Benign:** Non cancerous, does not invade nearby tissues or spread to other parts of the body.

**Biopsy:** The removal of cells or tissues for examination under a microscope.

**Brachytherapy:** Sources of radiation energy that are implanted directly into or near the tumor.

**Buccal Mucosa:** The inner lining of the cheeks and lips.

**Cachexia:** Breakdown of muscle mass resulting from rapid weight loss.

**Carcinogen:** Any substance that causes cancer.

**Carcinoma:** Cancer that beings in the lining or covering of an organ.

**CAT, CT:** A test using computers and special x-rays to create images of various parts of the body for evaluation. Computerized Axial Tomography scan.

**CBC:** complete blood count.

**Chemotherapy:** Treatment with anticancer drugs.

**Clinical Trial:** A research study that evaluates the effectiveness of new interventions in people. Each study is designed to evaluate new methods of screening, prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of cancer.

**CNS:** Central Nervous System

**Complete response:** Tumor(s) has grossly disappeared as a result of therapy

**3-D Conformal:** Radiation beams shaped to match a tumor’s shape. The shaping is accomplished by Radiation Therapy (3-D-CRT) special equipment.

**CXR:** Chest x-ray.
**Dentist:** A health professional who specializes in caring for the teeth, gums, and oral tissues.

**Dietitian:** A health care provider who guides people in planning their food choices to ensure they get proper nutrition.

**Diagnosis:** The process of identifying a disease by the signs and symptoms.

**Dosimetry:** Determination of the amount, rate and distribution of the radiation therapy.

**Drug resistance:** Failure of cancer cells to respond to chemotherapy.

**Dry eye (xerophthalmia):** Dry eyes may result from irradiation of the lacrimal (tear producing) glands.

**Dysphagia:** Difficulty with swallowing.

**ECOG Performance Status:** A score from 0-5 that conveys a patient’s ability to function and perform normal daily activities, where 0 indicates completely normal functioning.

**Edema:** Swelling of the body part caused by an abnormal build-up of fluids.

**Endoscopy:** The use of a thin, lighted tube (called an endoscope) to examine the inside of the body.

**ENT:** A physician specializing in diseases of the ears, nose and throat.

**Epiglottis:** The flap that covers the trachea during swallowing so that food does not enter the lungs, the upper part of the larynx or the voice box.

**Epstein-Barr virus:** A common virus that remains dormant in most people. It has been associated with certain cancers, including nasopharyngeal carcinoma.

**Erythema:** Redness of the skin.

**Erythroplakia:** A reddened patch with a velvety surface found in the mouth.

**External radiation:** Radiation therapy using a machine located outside the body to aim high-energy rays at a tumor.

**Facial nerve:** The nerve that controls muscles of expression of the face.

**Facial lymphedema:** Facial lymphedema is a common complication of head and neck surgery, especially when combined with radiation.

**Fibrosis:** Formation of fibrous tissue as a reaction or as a repair process; may occur due to treatment and/or disease.

**FNA:** Fine-needle aspiration. The removal of a sample of tissue or fluid with a needle for examination.

**Fractionation:** Dividing the total doses of radiation therapy into several smaller, equal doses delivered over a period of several days or weeks.

**Functional disabilities:** Impaired ability to eat, speak, and swallow because of mucositis, dry mouth, trismus and infection.

**Gastrostomy tube:** A tube surgically placed through the skin into the stomach to deliver nutrition.
**GY, Gray:** the unit of measurement for radiation. Other units are the centiGray (cGy) and the rad. One cGy equals one rad.

**Hematology:** Study of blood, blood producing organs and disorders.

**Hgb:** Hemoglobin, the oxygen carrying portion of red blood cells.

**High risk:** When the chance of developing cancer is greater than normally seen in a population.

**HN, H&N:** Head and Neck.

**Head and Neck Surgeon:** A surgeon specializing in the surgical treatment of conditions of the head and neck area.

**Human Papilloma Virus (HPV):** A virus that has been associated with some cancers of the head and neck.

**Hyperbaric oxygen (HBO):** A treatment using high-pressure oxygen in a chamber to heal or prevent disease often as a result of radiation therapy.

**Hyperthermia:** The use of heat in treating disease.

**Hypopharynx:** Bottom part of the throat.

**Hypothyroidism:** Hyperthyroidism is a decrease in functioning of the thyroid gland resulting in listlessness, fatigue, and feeling excessively cold.

**Imaging:** Tests that produce pictures of areas inside the body. (MRI, CT, PET, etc.)

**Immune system:** The complex group of organs and cells that defends the body against infection or disease.

**Immunotherapy:** Treatment to stimulate or restore the ability of the person’s immune system to fight infection and disease. Also used to lessen side effects that may be caused by some cancer treatments. Also called biological therapy or biological response modifier (BRM) therapy.

**Intravenous:** Injected in a vein. Also called IV.

**KPS, Karnofsky Performance Scale:** A score from 0 to 100 that conveys a patient’s ability to function and perform normal daily activities, where 100 indicates completely normal functioning.

**Larynx:** The organ of voice production; the part of the respiratory tract between the pharynx and the trachea; it consists of framework of cartilages and elastic membranes housing the vocal folds and the muscles which control the position and tension of these elements.

**LENT:** Late effects on normal tissue (long-term side effects).

**Leukoplakia:** A white patch that occurs on the mucous membranes of the mouth that does not scrape off; may be considered precancerous.

**L’Hermittes Syndrome:** L’Hermittes Syndrome is caused by the demylenation of the spinal cord from radiation therapy to the neck area. People often describe this experience as an electric shock-like sensation traveling down the neck and spine when bending the head downward. The sensation is very short-lived, usually no more than a second. This sensation is not indicative of a recurrence of cancer. However, symptoms of
this syndrome should be reported to the radiation oncologist. This syndrome should be self-limited and not lead to significant disability.

**LPN:** Licensed Practical Nurse.

**LPT:** Licensed Physical Therapist.

**Local therapy:** Treatment that affects cells in a tumor and the area near it.

**Lymph:** The almost colorless fluid that travels through the lymphatic system and carries cells that help fight infection and disease.

**Lymph Nodes:** Small organs located throughout the body along the channels of the lymphatic system. The lymph nodes store special cells that fight infection and other diseases. Clusters of lymph nodes are found in the underarms, groin, neck, chest, and abdomen. Also called lymph glands.

**Lymphatic System:** The tissues and organs that produce, store, and carry white blood cells that fight infection and other diseases. This system includes the bone marrow, spleen, thymus, and lymph nodes and a network of thin tubes that carry lymph and white blood cells. These tubes branch, like plod vessels, into all the tissues of the body.

**Lymphedema:** Swelling caused by lymph accumulation in the affected area.

**Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI):** Magnetic Resonance Imaging. A procedure in which a magnet linked to a computer is used to create detailed pictures of areas inside the body.

**Malignant:** Cancerous; a growth with a tendency to invade and destroy nearby tissue and spread to other parts of the body.

**Marginal mandibulectomy:** Partial removal of lower jaw bone.

**Maxillectomy:** The surgical removal of the upper jaw bone.

**Medical Oncologist:** A physician who specializes in the treatment of cancer using drugs. Not a surgeon.

**Metastasis:** The spread of cancer from one part of the body to another. Cells in the metastatic (secondary) tumor are the same type as those in the original (primary) tumor.

**Metaplasia:** Change in cells from normal to abnormal.

**Monoclonal Antibodies:** Laboratory-produced substances that can locate and bind to specific proteins and cells. Many monoclonal antibodies are being evaluated for purposes of cancer detection or therapy.

**Morbidity:** A disease or the incidence of disease within a population. Morbidity also refers to adverse effects caused by a treatment.

**Mucositis:** A complication of radiation therapy or chemotherapy in which the lining of the digestive system becomes inflamed. Often seen as sores in the mouth and throat.

**Multimodality Therapy:** Therapy that combines more than one method of treatment such as chemotherapy and radiation.

**Nasopharynx:** The area of the upper throat behind the nose.

**Neck dissection:** A surgical procedure to remove lymph nodes from the neck.
NCI: National Cancer Institute (part of NIH).
NED: No evidence of disease.
Neoadjuvant Therapy: Therapy given before the primary treatment with the intent of improving the effectiveness of the primary treatment; may be chemotherapy, radiation or other treatment.
Neuropathy: Malfunction of the nerves sometimes caused by chemotherapy; numbness and weakness are common symptoms.
Neurotoxicity: Damage to the nervous system caused by some treatments.
Obturator: A prosthesis used to fill the space between the mouth and nose.
Oncology nurse: A nurse who is trained to care for people undergoing treatment for cancer. An oncology nurse will carry out the treatment plan determined by you and your health care team. In addition to coordinating your care, oncology nurses give medicines; monitor symptoms and side effects; and can provide information, tips, and advice as you go through treatment.
Oral pathologist: A dental specialist educated and trained in the area of diagnosis and management of mouth diseases.
Oral surgeon: A dental specialist with special training in surgery of the mouth and jaw.
Oropharynx: The oropharynx is the middle part of the pharynx. The oropharynx includes the soft palate (the back of the mouth), the base of the tongue, and the tonsils.
Osteoradionecrosis (ORN): Bone tissue death resulting from inadequate blood supply from radiation therapy.
Otolaryngologist: A surgeon who deals with conditions in the ear, nose and throat and related structures in the head and neck.
OT: Occupational Therapy.
Palate: The roof of the mouth. The front portion is bony (hard palate) and the back portion is muscular (soft palate)
Palliative Treatment: Treatment to reduce symptoms rather than to cure.
Paranasal sinuses: Small hollow spaces in the bones of the head surrounding the nose.
Partial Response (PR): Tumors have shrunk but have not disappeared as a result of treatment.
Pathologist: A doctor who identifies diseases by studying cells and tissues under a microscope.
PDT: Photodynamic Therapy.
**PET:** Positron Emission Tomography scan. A computerized image of the metabolic activity of the body tissues used to determine the presence of disease.

**Pharynx:** The hollow tube about 5 inches long that starts behind the nose and ends at the top of the trachea (windpipe) and esophagus (the tube that goes to the stomach).

**Physical therapist:** A medical professional who is trained in the use of physical treatments, such as exercise, massage and lymphedema management.

**Plastic surgeon:** A surgeon who specializes in reducing scarring or disfigurement that may occur as the result of accidents, birth defects, or treatment of disease. The plastic surgeon may also be involved in improving function after tumor removal.

**Precancerous:** A term used to describe a condition that may become cancer.

**Prognosis:** the likely outcome or course of a disease; the chance of recovery.

**Prosthesis:** An artificial replacement of part of the body, such as a tooth, a facial bone, or the palate.

**Prosthodontist:** A dentist with special training in making replacements for missing teeth or other structures of the oral cavity to restore appearance, comfort and/or health.

**PT:** Physical Therapy.

**QOL-Quality of Life:** The overall enjoyment of life. Many clinical trials measure aspects of a person’s sense of well-being and ability to perform various tasks in order to assess the effects that cancer and its treatment have on the person. “A patient’s appraisal of and satisfaction with their current level of functioning as compared to what they perceive as possible or ideal.”

**Radiation caries:** Lifelong risk of rampant dental decay that may begin within 3 months of completing radiation treatment.

**Radiation dermatitis:** Skin changes may occur in the area under treatment, similar to sunburn. Most effects of radiation therapy to the skin are temporary.

**Radiation Oncologist:** A physician specializing in the use of irradiation to treat disease, especially cancer.

**Radiation Therapy (radiotherapy):** Radiation therapy uses high-energy radiation from x-rays, neutrons, and other sources to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. Radiation may come from a machine outside the body (external-beam radiation therapy) or from materials (radioisotopes) that produce radiation that are placed in or near the tumor or in the area where the cancer cells are found (internal radiation therapy, implant radiation, or brachytherapy). Systemic radiation therapy involves giving a radioactive substance, such as radioactive iodine used in the treatment of thyroid cancer.

**Radioactive:** Giving off radiation.

**Radiologist:** A physician trained to perform and interpret x-ray studies.

**Rampant dental decay and demineralization:** Rapid decay or erosion of the tooth’s surface as a result of changes in both the quality and quantity of saliva following cancer treatment.
Recurrence: The return of cancer, at the same site as the original (primary) tumor or in another location, after it had disappeared.

Refractory: Doesn’t respond to treatment.

Regimen: the plan that outlines the dosage, schedule and duration of treatment.

Regression: Reduction in symptoms or disease process.

Relapse: Reappearance of disease after it has disappeared.

Remission: When the signs and symptoms of cancer go away, the disease is said to be “in remission.” A remission can be temporary or permanent.

Risk Factor: Any factor that may increase a person’s chances of developing cancer.

Salivary glands: Glands that produce saliva.

Sarcoma: A cancer of the bone, cartilage, fat muscle, blood vessels or other connective or supportive tissues.

Screening: Checking for disease when there are no symptoms.

Second Primary: A new tumor unrelated to the original tumor.

Serous: Thin watery consistency.

SCC: Squamous Cell Carcinoma.

SCCHN: Squamous Cell Carcinoma of the Head and Neck.

Side effects: Problems that occur when treatment affects healthy cells.

Social worker: A professional who is trained to provide counseling and practical assistance to meet your specific needs. The social worker can provide counseling to help you cope with concerns and issues related to your diagnosis, treatment, symptoms, and side effects of cancer. Individual, family, and support group counseling can be offered.

Speech pathologist: A specialist trained to help with speech and swallowing disorders.

Squamous cell carcinoma: Cancer that begins in thin, flat cells that make up the lining of many areas of the body, including the oral cavity.

Stage: The extent of cancer and whether the disease has spread from the original site to other parts of the body.

Standard Treatment: The best treatment currently known for a cancer, based on results of past research.

Systemic: Affecting the entire body.

Targeted Therapy: A type of treatment that uses drugs or other substances to identify and attack specific cancer cells without harming normal cells.

Thrush: A fungal infection of the mouth or throat.

Tissue: A group or layer of cells that together perform specific functions.

TNM: A staging system used to assess the size of tumor (T), lymph node involvement (N), and Metastases (M), see stage.
**Tonsils:** Small masses of lymphatic tissue on either side of the throat.

**Toxicity:** The quality of substances that causes ill effects.

**Tracheostomy:** Surgery to create an opening (stoma) into the windpipe. The opening itself may also be called a tracheostomy.

**Trismus:** Stiffness in some or all of the muscles that open and close the mouth thereby restricting the opening of the mouth.

**Tumor:** An abnormal mass of tissue that results from excessive cell division. Tumors perform no useful body function. They may be either benign (not cancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

**Tumor-Suppressor:** genes that normally restrain cell growth but, when missing or inactive by mutation, allow cells to grow uncontrolled.

**Ultrasonography:** A study in which sound waves (called ultrasound) are bounced off tissues and the echoes are converted into a picture (sonogram).

**Upper Aerodigestive Tract Cancer:** Cancer that develops into the tissue lining the upper swallowing and breathing passages. This is a major type of oral and head and neck cancer.

**WBC:** White blood cell.

**White Blood Cells:** Cells that help the body fight infection and disease.

**WNL:** Within normal limits.

**Xerostomia:** Dry mouth.

**X-ray:** A type of high-energy radiation. In low doses, x-rays are used to diagnose diseases by making pictures of the inside of the body. In high doses, x-rays are used to treat cancer.

**XRT:** Radiation Therapy