After Salivary Gland Cancer Treatment

Living as a Cancer Survivor

For many people, cancer treatment often raises questions about next steps as a survivor.

- Living as a Salivary Gland Cancer Survivor

Cancer Concerns After Treatment

Treatment may remove or destroy the cancer, but it is very common to have questions about cancer coming back or treatment no longer working.

- Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Salivary Gland Cancer?

Living as a Salivary Gland Cancer Survivor

For some people with salivary gland cancer, treatment can remove or destroy the cancer. The end of treatment can be both stressful and exciting. You may be relieved to finish treatment, but yet it’s hard not to worry about cancer coming back. This is very common if you’ve had cancer.

For other people, the cancer might never go away completely. Some people may get regular treatment with chemotherapy or targeted therapy or other treatments to try and help keep the cancer in check. Learning to live with cancer that does not go away can be difficult and very stressful.

Life after cancer means returning to some familiar things and also making some new choices.
Follow-up care

Even if you have completed treatment, you will likely have follow-up visits with your doctor for many years. It’s very important to go to all your follow-up appointments. During these visits, your doctors will ask if you are having any problems and may do exams and lab tests or imaging tests to look for signs of cancer or treatment side effects.

Some treatment side effects might last a long time or might not even show up until years after you have finished treatment. Your doctor visits are a good time to ask questions and talk about any changes or problems you notice or concerns you have. It’s very important to report any new symptoms to the doctor right away.

Most doctors recommend follow-up exams every few months for the first couple of years, and then less often after that if nothing abnormal is found.

Imaging tests such as CT scans may be done after treatment to get a baseline idea of what the head and neck area look like. More imaging tests may be done if you later develop any signs or symptoms that might be due to a return of the cancer.

If you had radiation therapy to the neck, your doctor will probably want to get blood tests as well to check your thyroid function.

You may be advised to see your dentist after treatment to check on the health of your teeth. Your doctor will also want to keep a close eye on your hearing, speech, and swallowing, which can be affected by treatment. If you are having problems with any of these, your doctor may refer you to a therapist for help with rehabilitation.

Ask your doctor for a survivorship care plan

Talk with your doctor about developing a survivorship care plan for you. This plan might include:

- A suggested schedule for follow-up exams and tests
- A schedule for other tests you might need in the future, such as early detection (screening) tests for other types of cancer, or tests to look for long-term health effects from your cancer or its treatment
- A list of possible late- or long-term side effects from your treatment, including what to watch for and when you should contact your doctor
- Diet and physical activity suggestions
• Reminders to keep your appointments with your primary care provider (PCP), who will monitor your general health care

**Keeping health insurance and copies of your medical records**

Even after treatment, it’s very important to keep health insurance. Tests and doctor visits cost a lot, and even though no one wants to think of their cancer coming back, this could happen.

At some point after your cancer treatment, you might find yourself seeing a new doctor who doesn’t know about your medical history. It’s important to keep copies of your medical records to give your new doctor the details of your diagnosis and treatment. Learn more in [Keeping Copies of Important Medical Records](#).

**Your appearance and other changes**

Surgery or other treatments can affect nerves and other structures in the face and neck. This can affect how you look. Ask your doctor about reconstructive surgery options that might be available for you.

Surgery around the jaw or neck can sometimes lead to ear numbness, weakness in raising your arm above your head, and weakness of the lower lip. If this happens, your doctor can refer you to a physical therapist, who can teach you exercises to improve your neck and shoulder strength and movement.

Treatment of salivary gland cancer can sometimes cause problems such as trouble speaking or swallowing, dry mouth, or even tooth loss. This can make it hard to eat, which can lead to weight loss and weakness due to poor nutrition.

Some people may need to change what they eat during and after treatment or may need nutritional supplements to help make sure they get the nutrients they need. A team of doctors and nutritionists can work with you to help you manage your individual nutritional needs and maintain a healthy weight.

If treatment affects how you speak, there might be both surgical and non-surgical options that can help. Your doctor will probably refer you to a speech therapist, a professional who is trained in helping people with speech problems. Some people might need to learn new ways of speaking. The speech therapist can play a major role in helping with this.
Dental care is often very important at this time as well, especially if you your mouth is dry as a result of surgery. If needed, your doctor can refer you to a dentist, who can help you care for your teeth and offer ways to help with dry mouth, such as using artificial saliva.

Tell your doctor or nurse about any other problems you're having. There are also groups that can provide support and help teach you how to manage any lingering problems you may have.

**Can I lower my risk of the salivary gland cancer progressing or coming back?**

If you have (or have had) salivary gland cancer, you probably want to know if there are things you can do that might lower your risk of the cancer growing or coming back, such as exercising, eating a certain type of diet, or taking nutritional supplements. Unfortunately, it’s not yet clear if there are things you can do that will help.

Adopting healthy behaviors such as [not smoking](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/causes-risk-factors/smoking.html), [eating well](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/causes-risk-factors/diet.html), [getting regular physical activity](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/causes-risk-factors/exercise.html), and [staying at a healthy weight](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/causes-risk-factors/weight.html) might help, but no one knows for sure. However, we do know that these types of changes can have positive effects on your health that can extend beyond your risk of salivary gland cancer or other cancers.

**About dietary supplements**

So far, no [dietary supplements](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/causes-risk-factors/dietary-supplements.html) (including vitamins, minerals, and herbal products) have been shown to clearly help lower the risk of cancer progressing or coming back. This doesn’t mean that no supplements will help, but it’s important to know that none have been proven to do so.

Dietary supplements are not regulated like medicines in the United States – they do not have to be proven effective (or even safe) before being sold, although there are limits on what they’re allowed to claim they can do. If you’re thinking about taking any type of nutritional supplement, talk to your health care team. They can help you decide which ones you can use safely while avoiding those that might be harmful.

**If the cancer comes back**

If the cancer does recur at some point, your treatment options will depend on where the cancer is located, what treatments you’ve had before, and your health. For more
information on how recurrent cancer is treated, see Treatment of Recurrent Salivary Gland Cancer.

For more general information on recurrence, you may also want to see Understanding Recurrence.

**Could I get a second cancer after treatment?**

People who’ve had salivary gland cancer can still get other cancers. In fact, salivary gland cancer survivors are at higher risk for getting some other types of cancer. Learn more in Second Cancers After Salivary Gland Cancer.

**Getting emotional support**

Some amount of feeling depressed, anxious, or worried is normal when cancer is a part of your life. Some people are affected more than others. But everyone can benefit from help and support from other people, whether friends and family, religious groups, support groups, professional counselors, or others. Learn more in Life After Cancer.

- References


  See all references for Salivary Gland Cancer

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**Can I Get Another Cancer After Having Salivary Gland Cancer?**

Cancer survivors can be affected by a number of health problems, but often their greatest concern is facing cancer again. If a cancer comes back after treatment it is
called a “recurrence.” But some cancer survivors may develop a new, unrelated cancer later. This is called a “second cancer.” No matter what type of cancer you have had, it is still possible to get another (new) cancer, even after surviving the first.

Unfortunately, being treated for cancer doesn’t mean you can’t get another cancer. People who have had cancer can still get the same types of cancers that other people get. In fact, certain types of cancer and cancer treatments can be linked to a higher risk of certain second cancers.

Survivors of salivary gland cancers can get any second cancer, but they have an increased risk of:

- Another salivary gland cancer (this is different than the first cancer coming back)
- Cancer of the oral cavity (mouth)
- Lung cancer
- Thyroid cancer

**Follow-up after treatment**

After completing treatment for salivary gland cancer, you should still see your doctor regularly. Your doctor may order tests to look for signs that the cancer has come back or spread. These tests are also useful in finding some second cancers, particularly a new salivary gland cancer or lung cancer. Experts don’t recommend any other tests to look for second cancers in patients who don’t have symptoms. Let your doctor know about any new symptoms or problems, because they could be caused by the cancer coming back or by a new disease or second cancer.

Survivors of salivary gland cancers should follow the American Cancer Society guidelines for the early detection of cancer and stay away from tobacco products. Smoking increases the risk of getting certain second cancers as well as other health problems.

To help maintain good health, survivors should also:

- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight
- Adopt a physically active lifestyle
- Consume a healthy diet, with an emphasis on plant foods
- Limit consumption of alcohol to no more than 1 drink per day for women or 2 per day for men

These steps may also lower the risk of some cancers.

See Second Cancers in Adults for more information about causes of second cancers.
If cancer keeps growing or comes back after one kind of treatment, it’s possible that another treatment plan might still cure the cancer, or at least keep it in check enough to help you live longer and feel better. Clinical trials also might offer chances to try newer treatments that could be helpful. But when a person has tried many different treatments and the cancer has not gotten any better, even newer treatments might no longer be helpful. If this happens, it’s important to weigh the possible limited benefits of trying a new treatment against the possible downsides, including treatment side effects. Everyone has their own way of looking at this.

This is likely to be the hardest part of your battle with cancer – when you have been through many treatments and nothing’s working anymore. Your doctor may offer you new options, but at some point you may need to consider that treatment is not likely to improve your health or change your outcome or survival.

If you want to continue to get treatment for as long as you can, you need to think about the odds of treatment having any benefit and how this compares to the possible risks and side effects. Your doctor can estimate how likely it is the cancer will respond to treatment you’re considering. For instance, the doctor may say that more treatment might have about a 1 in 100 chance of working. Some people are still tempted to try this. But it’s important to have realistic expectations if you do choose this plan.

Palliative care

No matter what you decide to do, it’s important to feel as good as you can. Make sure you are asking for and getting treatment for any symptoms you might have, such as nausea or pain. This type of treatment is called palliative care.
Palliative care helps relieve symptoms, but is not expected to cure the disease. It can be given along with cancer treatment, or can even be cancer treatment. The difference is its purpose. The main goal of palliative care is to improve the quality of your life, or help you feel as good as you can for as long as you can. Sometimes this means using drugs to help with symptoms like pain or nausea. Sometimes, though, the treatments used to control your symptoms are the same as those used to treat cancer. For instance, radiation might be used to help relieve pain caused by a large tumor. Or chemo might be used to help shrink a tumor and keep it from blocking the bowels. But this is not the same as treatment to try to cure the cancer.

**Hospice care**

At some point, you may benefit from hospice care. This is special care that treats the person rather than the disease; it focuses on quality rather than length of life. Most of the time, it’s given at home. Your cancer may be causing problems that need to be managed, and hospice focuses on your comfort. You should know that while getting hospice care often means the end of treatments such as chemo and radiation, it doesn’t mean you can’t have treatment for the problems caused by the cancer or other health conditions. In hospice the focus of your care is on living life as fully as possible and feeling as well as you can at this difficult time. You can learn more about hospice care in [Hospice Care](#).

Staying hopeful is important, too. Your hope for a cure may not be as bright, but there’s still hope for good times with family and friends – times that are filled with happiness and meaning. Pausing at this time in your cancer treatment gives you a chance to refocus on the most important things in your life. Now is the time to do some things you’ve always wanted to do and to stop doing the things you no longer want to do. Though the cancer may be beyond your control, there are still choices you can make.

You can learn more about the changes that occur when treatment stops working, and about planning ahead for yourself and your family, in [Advanced Cancer](#) and [End of Life Care](#). You can read them online or call us at 1-800-227-2345 to have free copies mailed to you.

- **References**

[See all references for Salivary Gland Cancer](#)

Last Medical Review: January 13, 2014 Last Revised: March 3, 2015