



[cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) | 1.800.227.2345

---

**EASY READING**

# If You Have Salivary Gland Cancer

*Jump to a topic*

- [What is salivary gland cancer?](#)
- [Different kinds of salivary gland cancer](#)
- [How does the doctor know I have salivary gland cancer?](#)
- [How serious is my cancer?](#)
- [What kind of treatment will I need?](#)
- [What will happen after treatment?](#)

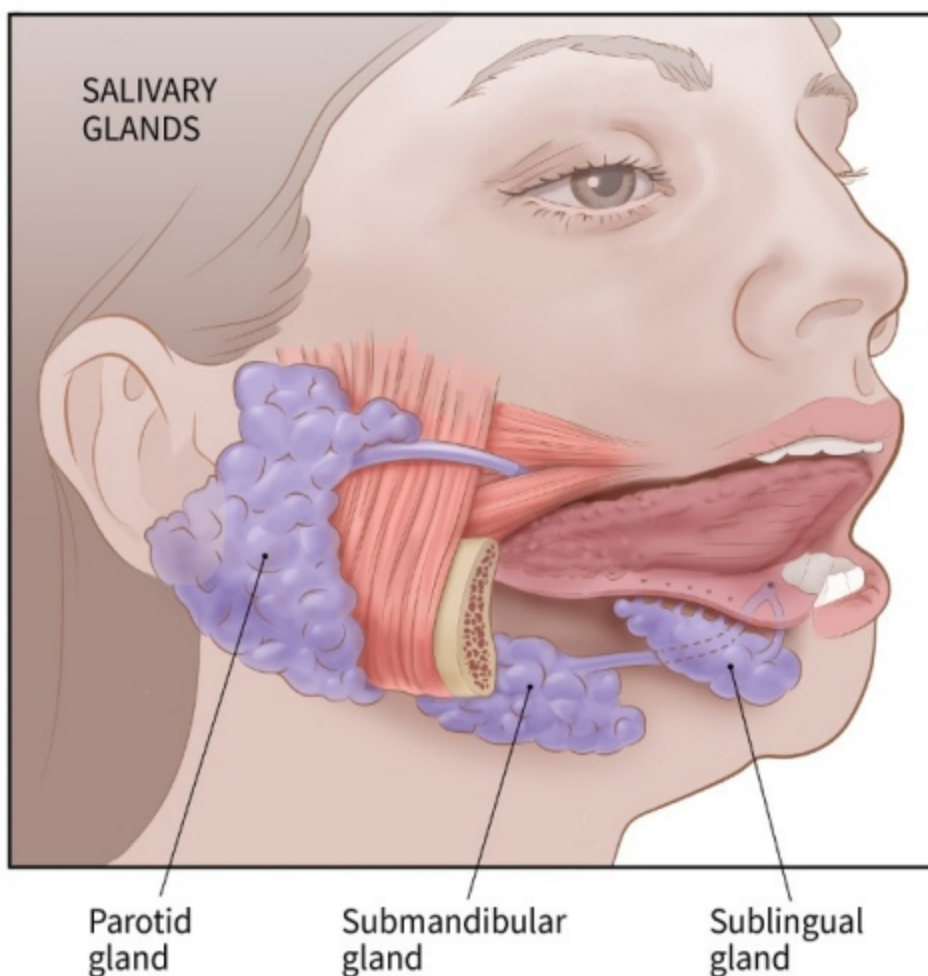
## What is salivary gland cancer?

Cancer can start any place in the body. Cancer that starts in one of the salivary glands can have many names. It depends on where the cancer starts. All of these cancers start when cells in part of a salivary gland grow out of control and crowd out normal cells. This makes it hard for the body to work the way it should.

Cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body. Cancer cells in a salivary gland can sometimes travel to the skull and grow there. When cancer cells do this, it's called metastasis .

Cancer is always named for the place where it starts, because when the cancer cells grow in a new place, they still look the same as the cells where the cancer started. So when salivary gland cancer spreads to the skull (or any other place), it's still called salivary gland cancer. It's not called bone cancer unless it starts from cells in the skull.

**Ask your doctor to use this picture to show you where the cancer is.**



## Different kinds of salivary gland cancer

There are many [types of salivary gland cancers](#)<sup>1</sup>. Your doctor can tell you more about the type you have.

The most common type of cancer in the salivary glands is called carcinoma. (It's pronounced CAR-sin-**O**-muh.) These cancers start in the cells that line all parts of the salivary glands. They most often start in the parotid (pare-UH-tid) glands.

### Questions to ask the doctor

- Why do you think I have cancer
- Is there a chance I don't have cancer?
- Would you please write down the kind of cancer you think I might have?
- What will happen next?

## How does the doctor know I have salivary gland cancer?

These cancers may not be found until they cause problems that make the person go to the doctor. Sometimes changes are seen during a routine visit to the doctor or dentist. You may be sent to see a doctor who focuses on diseases of the ear, nose, and throat (called an ENT doctor, an otolaryngologist [O-toe-LAIR-in-**GOL**-uh-jist], or a head and neck surgeon).

The doctor will ask you questions about your health and does a physical exam. If signs are pointing to salivary gland cancer, more tests will be done. Here are some of the [tests you may need](#)<sup>2</sup>:

**Complete mouth and neck exam:** The doctor will check your mouth and neck, looking and feeling for any abnormal areas. The lymph nodes in the neck will be felt for swelling, which could be a sign of cancer. Because some parts of the mouth and throat are not easy to see, the doctor may use mirrors, lights, and/or special fiber-optic scopes to look at these areas.

**Biopsy** (BY-op-see): For this test, the doctor takes out a small piece of tissue where the cancer seems to be. The tissue is checked for cancer cells. This is the best way to know for sure if you have cancer.

**CT scan:** This is also called a “CAT scan.” It’s a special kind of x-ray that takes detailed pictures to see if the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes or other parts of your head or neck.

**MRI scan:** MRIs use radio waves and strong magnets instead of x-rays to take detailed pictures. MRIs can be used to learn more about the size of the cancer and look for other tumors.

**Chest x-rays:** X-rays may be done to check for tumors in your jaw or teeth. They may also be used to see if the cancer has spread to the lungs.

**PET scan:** In this test, you are given a special type of sugar that can be seen inside your body with a special camera. If there is cancer, this sugar shows up as “hot spots” where the cancer is found. This test is useful when your doctor thinks the cancer might have spread, but doesn’t know where.

**Blood tests:** Certain blood tests can tell the doctor more about your overall health.

## Questions to ask the doctor

- What tests will I need to have?
- Who will do these tests?
- Where will they be done?
- Who can explain them to me?
- How and when will I get the results?
- Who will explain the results to me?
- What do I need to do next?

## How serious is my cancer?

If you have salivary gland cancer, the doctor will want to find out [how far it has spread](#)<sup>3</sup>. This is called staging. You may have heard other people say that their cancer was “stage 1” or “stage 2.” Your doctor will want to find out the stage of your cancer to help decide what type of treatment is best for you.

The stage describes the growth or spread of the cancer in the place it started. It also tells if the cancer has spread to other parts of your body that are close by or farther away.

Your cancer can be stage 1, 2, 3, or 4. The lower the number, the less the cancer has spread. A higher number, like stage 4, means a more serious cancer that has spread from where it started. Be sure to ask the doctor about the cancer stage and what it means for you.

The cancer cells in the biopsy sample will also be graded. This helps doctors predict how fast the cancer is likely to grow and spread. Cancer cells are graded based on how much they look like normal cells. Grades 1, 2, and 3 are used. Cells that look very different from normal cells are given a higher grade (3) and tend to grow faster. Ask the doctor to explain the grade of your cancer. The grade helps the doctor decide which treatment is best for you.

## Questions to ask the doctor

- Do you know the stage and grade of the cancer?
- If not, how and when will you find out the stage and grade of the cancer?
- Would you explain to me what the stage and grade mean in my case?
- Based on the stage and grade of the cancer, how long do you think I'll live?

- What will happen next?

## What kind of treatment will I need?

There are many [ways to treat salivary gland cancer](#)<sup>4</sup>, but the main types of treatment are local or systemic.

Surgery and radiation are used to treat only the cancer. They do not affect the rest of the body. This is called *local treatment*.

Chemo drugs go through the whole body. They can reach cancer cells anywhere in the body. This is called *systemic* (pronounced sis-TEM-ick) *treatment*.

The treatment plan that's best for you will depend on:

- Where the cancer is
- The stage and grade of the cancer
- The chance that a type of treatment will cure the cancer or help in some way
- How treatment will affect the way you talk, breathe, and eat
- Your age
- Other health problems you have
- Your feelings about the treatment and the side effects that come with it

## Surgery for salivary cancer

Surgery is the most common way to treat salivary gland cancer. A surgeon takes out all the cancer and an edge of healthy tissue around it. Surgery may also be used to take out lymph nodes in the neck that have cancer in them.

### ***Side effects of surgery***

Any type of surgery can have risks and side effects. Ask the doctor what you can expect. If you have problems, let your doctors know. Doctors who treat people with salivary gland cancers should be able to help you with any problems that come up.

## Radiation treatments

Radiation (pronounced RAY-dee-**A**-shun) uses high-energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells. Here are some ways this treatment may be used to treat salivary gland cancers:

- As the main treatment for tumors that can't be taken out because of how big they are or where they are
- To kill any cancer cells that may be left after surgery
- To ease problems caused by the cancer

Radiation is aimed at the cancer from a machine outside the body. This is called *external beam radiation*. It's a lot like getting an x-ray.

### **Side effects of radiation treatments**

If your doctor suggests radiation treatment, talk about what side effects you might have. Side effects depend on the type of radiation that's used and the part of your body that's treated. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Skin changes where the radiation is given
- Feeling very tired (fatigue, which is pronounced fuh-TEEG)
- Hoarse voice
- Taste changes
- Mouth and throat sores
- Dry mouth
- Trouble swallowing or eating
- Bone damage
- Thyroid gland damage

Your doctor may have you see a dentist before starting radiation. This is done to fix any problems with your teeth or gums that might get worse with radiation.

Most side effects get better after treatment ends. Some might last longer. Talk to your cancer care team about what you can expect.

### **Chemo**

Chemo (pronounced KEY-mo) is the short word for chemotherapy (pronounced KEY-mo-THAIR-uh-pee) – the use of drugs to fight cancer. The drugs may be given into a vein or taken as pills. These drugs go into the blood and spread through the body.

Chemo is given in cycles or rounds. Each round of treatment is followed by a break. Most of the time, 2 or more chemo drugs are given. Treatment often lasts for many months.

Chemo is not usually used to treat salivary gland cancer, but sometimes it's given along with radiation. It may help the radiation work better.

### ***Side effects of chemo***

Chemo can make you feel very tired, sick to your stomach, and cause your hair to fall out. But these problems go away after treatment ends.

There are ways to treat most chemo side effects. If you have side effects, talk to your cancer care team so they can help.

### **Clinical trials**

Clinical trials are research studies that test new drugs or other treatments in people. They compare standard treatments with others that may be better.

If you would like to learn more about clinical trials, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital takes conducts clinical trials. See [Clinical Trials](#) to learn more.

Clinical trials are one way to get state-of-the art cancer treatment. They are also how doctors find better ways to treat cancer. If your doctor can find one that's studying the kind of cancer you have, it's up to you whether to take part. And if you do sign up for a clinical trial, you can always stop at any time.

### **What about other treatments that I hear about?**

When you have cancer you might hear about other ways to treat the cancer or treat your symptoms. These may not always be standard medical treatments. These treatments may be vitamins, herbs, special diets, and other things. You may wonder about these treatments.

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to help. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you're thinking about using, whether it's a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

### ***Questions to ask the doctor***

- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- What's the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
- Will treatment include surgery? If so, who will do the surgery?
- What will the surgery be like?
- What will I look like after surgery?
- How will my body work after surgery?
- Will I need other types of treatment, too?
- What's the goal of these treatments?
- What side effects could I have from these treatments?
- What can I do about side effects that I might have?
- Is there a clinical trial that might be right for me?
- What about special vitamins or diets that friends tell me about? How will I know if they are safe?
- How soon do I need to start treatment?
- What should I do to be ready for treatment?
- Is there anything I can do to help the treatment work better?
- What's the next step?

## What will happen after treatment?

You'll be glad [when treatment is over](#)<sup>5</sup>. But it's hard not to worry about cancer coming back. Even when cancer never comes back, people still worry about it. For years after treatment ends, you will see your cancer doctor. Be sure to go to all of these follow-up visits. You will have exams, blood tests, and maybe other tests to see if the cancer has come back.

At first, your visits may be every few months. Then, the longer you're cancer-free, the less often the visits are needed. Scope exams, lab tests, or imaging tests (like MRI or CT scans) may be done to look for signs of cancer or treatment side effects. Your doctor will tell you which tests should be done and how often based on the stage of your cancer and the type of treatment you had.

Having cancer and dealing with treatment can be hard, but it can also be a time to look at your life in new ways. You might be thinking about how to improve your health. Call us or talk to your doctor to find out what you can do to feel better.

You can't change the fact that you have cancer. What you can change is how you live the rest of your life – making healthy choices and feeling as well as you can.



## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/about/what-is-salivary-gland-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/about/what-is-salivary-gland-cancer.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/how-diagnosed.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/how-diagnosed.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/staging.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/staging.html)
4. [www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/treating.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/treating.html)
5. [www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/after-treatment.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/salivary-gland-cancer/after-treatment.html)
6. <http://www.cancer.org>

## Words to know

**Biopsy** (BY-op-see): taking out a small piece of tissue to see if there are cancer cells in it

**Metastasis** (muh-TAS-tuh-sis): cancer cells that have spread from where they started to other places in the body

**Nasal cavity**: the inside of the nose above the roof of the mouth

**Parotid glands**: the 2 biggest salivary glands that are just in front of and below the ears

**Skull**: the set of bones that form the head, face, and jaw

**Sublingual glands**: salivary glands that are in the bottom of the mouth under the tongue

**Submandibular glands**: salivary glands that are under the jaw bone

## How can I learn more?

We have a lot more information for you. You can find it online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) (<http://www.cancer.org>)<sup>6</sup>. Or, you can call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 to talk to one of our cancer information specialists.

Last Revised: October 8, 2017

**Written by**

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team  
([www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html))

Our team is made up of doctors and oncology certified nurses with deep knowledge of cancer care as well as journalists, editors, and translators with extensive experience in medical writing.

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our Content Usage Policy ([www.cancer.org/about-us/policies/content-usage.html](http://www.cancer.org/about-us/policies/content-usage.html)).

**cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345**