



Treatment for Head and Neck Cancer

Treatment for head and neck cancer is tailored to each individual and depends on the type of cancer, its location, stage, and your overall health. Your multidisciplinary team (MDT) will explain the recommended treatment plan and discuss the benefits, potential side effects, and expected outcomes. Treatment may involve surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or a combination of these approaches. While the journey can feel daunting, your healthcare team will guide and support you every step of the way.

For many people, surgery is an important part of treatment. This may involve removing the primary tumour and, where necessary, some of the lymph nodes in the neck. A procedure known as a neck dissection or radical neck dissection may be recommended if cancer has spread to the lymph nodes. During this operation, surgeons remove affected lymph nodes and surrounding tissue to reduce the risk of the cancer returning. Depending on the extent of surgery, reconstructive procedures may also be performed to help restore appearance and function.

Radiotherapy is one of the most common treatments for head and neck cancer and uses high-energy X-rays to destroy cancer cells. Treatment is usually given Monday to Friday over several weeks. Although highly effective, radiotherapy can cause side effects such as mouth ulcers, sore throat, dry mouth, thick saliva, skin reactions, changes in taste, and increasing fatigue. Because swallowing can become difficult, some patients have a feeding tube inserted before treatment begins. This may be a PEG tube (placed directly into the stomach) or a nasogastric tube (passed through the nose). The feeding tube helps ensure you receive the nutrition, fluids, and medications needed to maintain your strength throughout treatment.

Chemotherapy and immunotherapy may be given alongside radiotherapy or used in more advanced disease. These treatments can enhance the effect of radiotherapy or help control cancer that has spread. Your treatment team will monitor you closely and provide medications and supportive care to help manage any side effects.

Treatment can be physically and emotionally demanding for both patients and caregivers. Speaking, eating, swallowing, and appearance may temporarily or permanently change, and recovery can take time. However, with support from surgeons, oncologists, specialist nurses, dietitians, speech and language therapists, and dentists, many people successfully complete treatment and begin rebuilding their lives.

The Swallows is here to support you throughout treatment and recovery. Our 24/7 Support Line and Text Support Service, patient and caregiver groups, and practical resources are designed to help you navigate every stage of the journey. With expert clinical care and the support of others who understand, you do not have to face treatment alone.

24/7 Support Line

07504 725 059



24/7 Text Line

07830 929 400