

The Ugly Facts about Head and Neck Cancer — PET can help



Do you, or a loved one, have a sore throat or maybe a sore in the mouth or on the lip that won't go away? Although this may be caused by something else, it is important to consult a doctor about such symptoms. It may be cancer.

"Head and neck cancer" covers a number of malignant tumours in the mouth, throat, thyroid gland, sinuses and nasal nodes. They generally spread through the lymph nodes in the neck. Such cancers have links to tobacco and alcohol usage, as well as chemicals, fumes and viruses.

Head and neck cancer represents only about 5% of cancer cases in Canada, but it is particularly devastating because of resulting functional problems and possible disfigurement. This can result both from the cancer and also from

invasive treatment. Treatment is aimed not only at eradicating the disease, but also at retaining the form and function of the head and neck structures, including the nose and mouth.

It is paramount to identify the limits of the cancer. As is always the case, the earlier the diagnosis the less invasive the treatment. That is where PET can be invaluable. A PET scan can show if there is cancer, and where, in order to determine accurate treatment.

A PET (positron emission

tomography) scan is the most accurate diagnostic imaging procedure available today for the early and accurate detection of cancer and its spread. It images the functional activity of the body cells, and pinpoints disease.

Treatment for head and neck cancer may involve surgery, radiation and/or chemotherapy, depending on the stage of the cancer when first found. A PET scan can help doctors when staging (evaluating) or restaging cancer. It can also show if abnormalities after treatment were caused by the therapy or are further tumour growth. Conventional anatomic imaging procedures, such as CT, are not useful here because treatment can cause anatomic distortions. For example, a mass may remain after treatment. A CT scan will detect the mass but will not be able to distinguish whether the tumour has been successfully treated or whether residual or recurring cancer that still needs to be treated.

So a PET scan is particularly useful in follow-up imaging to check for treatment results or recurrence. Moreover, after surgery, a PET scan is invaluable to see if further treatment is needed.

Head and neck cancer is another example of where you should take your health into your own hands. Get informed and then consult your doctor about PET. ■

Early Symptoms of Cancer of the Head and Neck Include:

- A sore on the lip or in the mouth that will not heal;
- Unusual bleeding, pain or numbness in the mouth;
- A nagging sore throat or a feeling that something is caught in the throat;
- A change in the voice.

These may indicate something much less serious, but if persistent, should be watched.

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2. The Vancouver PETSCAN Centre (June 15)
3. Use of PET in Lung Cancer (June 22)
4. Use of PET in Breast Cancer (June 29)
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6. Use of PET in Melanoma (July 27)
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9. A Patient's Guide for PET Scans (Sept. 7)
10. Why Use PET? (Sept. 21)
11. Waiting and Worrying (Oct. 5)
12. PET from a Surgeon's Perspective (Oct. 19)

If you didn't have a chance to pick up a copy of any of these issues, you can find the articles on the PETSCAN Centre's website: www.petscan.ca/news.htm

Full-body clinical PET scans are available at the Vancouver PETSCAN Centre.



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