

# Patient information leaflet on salivary gland cancers

By

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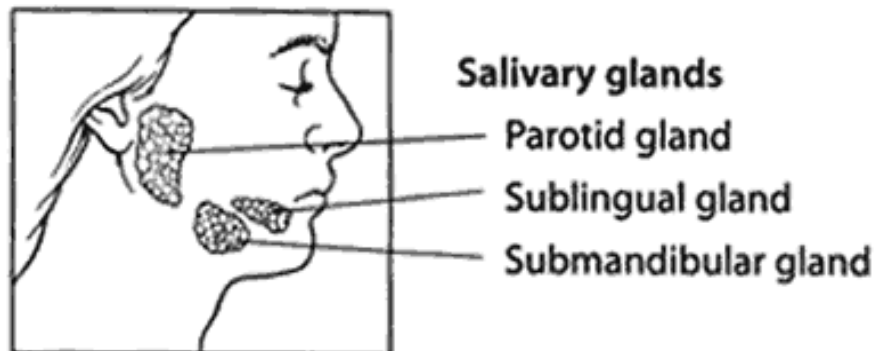
Cancer is a disease of the smallest units in the body the cells. There are many different types of cells in the body, and so many different types of cancer can arise from the different types of cells. However, unlike normal cells, the cancer cells are abnormal and multiply 'out of control'.

## The salivary glands

Salivary glands make saliva, the fluid found in the mouth and throat. This keeps our mouth moist and helps food to slide down the gullet, into the stomach. Saliva also contains enzymes that begin the process of breaking down food. There are 2 main types of salivary glands: *major* and *minor*.

The major salivary glands are the:

- **sublingual glands** - found underneath the tongue
- **parotid glands** - at the sides of the mouth just in front of the ears
- **submandibular glands** - under the jawbone.



There are also many more tiny glands in the lining of the mouth and throat. These do not have individual names but are known as the minor salivary glands.

## **Salivary gland cancer**

Salivary gland cancer is a rare form of cancer that occurs in one of the salivary glands in your mouth, neck or throat. They can occur at any age, but are more common in people over 50. Salivary gland cancer may be named after the type of cell from which it started. There are many different cell types. Salivary gland cancers are also given a grade of 1, 2, or 3 based on how they look under a microscope. Grade 1 (also called low-grade) cancer cells look more like normal cells and have a better outlook. Grade 3 (high-grade) look very different from normal cells and are likely to grow and spread more quickly. Grade 2 cancers are in between.

## **Causes of salivary gland cancer**

Like many other forms of cancer, the exact causes are unknown. Non-cancerous (benign) tumours of the salivary glands are more common than cancerous (malignant) tumours.

**Radiation:** Radiation treatment to the head and neck area or work exposure to certain radioactive substances can increase the risk of this cancer.

**Diet:** Some studies have found that a diet high in animal fat and low in vegetables could increase risk.

**Tobacco:** Tobacco use may increase the risk for one kind of salivary gland cancer.

**Family history:** You may be a higher risk if many members of your family have had this cancer.

**Work:** Some studies suggest that working with certain products such as nickel alloy dust or silica dust may increase the risk of this cancer. Other studies did not show a link.

## **Signs and symptoms**

Salivary gland cancer is often painless in its early stages. The most common sign is a lump, mass or swelling in the area of a salivary gland. Just because you have a lump in the area of

a salivary gland, however, doesn't necessarily mean you have cancer. More than half the tumors found in the salivary glands are non-cancerous (benign). Other symptoms include:

- Numbness in part of your face
- Muscle weakness on one side of your face
- Persistent pain in the area of a salivary gland

However, like most cancers, salivary gland cancers are best treated when diagnosed at an early stage. Therefore, you should report any of the above symptoms to your GP if they do not improve over a few days.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

If there is any reason to suspect salivary gland cancer, the doctor will use one or more methods to find out if the disease is really present. The doctor at the hospital will take your full medical history, carry out a physical examination, and take blood samples to check your general condition. The following tests are commonly used to make a firm diagnosis such as **X-rays, CT scan, MRI scan** and **Biopsy**.

### **How is it treated?**

Salivary gland cancers can start in various cells within the salivary glands and may be slow- or fast-growing. Your treatment plan should be tailored specifically for you by a team of doctors including surgeons, cancer specialists (oncologists) and doctors who specialize in treating cancer with radiation (radiation oncologists). The type of treatment given will depend on a number of things, including the position of the cancer, the exact type of cancer, and your general health.

The 3 main types of treatments for these cancers are surgery, radiation, and, less often, chemotherapy. Sometimes 2 or more of these methods are used together.

Because many types of cancers grow slowly and sometimes come back 10 or more years after treatment, your doctors will want to watch you for a long time. Physical exams and imaging studies such as CT scans, MRI, and x-rays may be done to watch for signs that the cancer has come back or spread.

## **Prevention**

Following steps help prevent salivary gland cancer or its progression:

Avoidance of tobacco use.

Avoidance or limiting exposure to radiation, when possible.

Checking your mouth and jaw periodically for lumps or bumps.

Having your doctor or dentist check your salivary glands during routine checkups.