



Dr Ritu Sheth
Head & Neck Surgeon
Godrej Memorial Hospital

HEAD & NECK CANCERS - IMPORTANCE OF EARLY DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

In India head and neck cancers constitute for approximately 33 % of all the reported cancers . This number is much higher than the west for example in States the incidence of head and neck cancers is only 11%. If we compare the population then, India would have the highest number of head and neck cancers far more in number compared to other countries. This problem is mainly the use of non smoked tobacco in the form of tobacco with lime or as gutka. Leading cancer in males of our country and 3rd of the cancer affecting the ladies.

The type of cancer seen in our country are also remarkably different. We see the largest incidence of cancer are of the oral cavity, which include the cancers of the lining of the cheeks , gums and tongue being the commonest.

The most common symptoms is a long standing non healing ulcer in the mouth. It is amazing to note that it is the most ignored symptom too. Most of the patients ignore this till it increases to a large size and produces a foul smell. These type of cancers can usually be managed well if the patients take notice of it and report to the doctors earlier. Surgery is usually the main stay of treatment followed by radiotherapy in these patients. A less extensive surgery in smaller cancers gives a better quality of life to the patients while extensive surgery helps in disease control but the quality of life of these patients may not be optimal.

Beside the cancer of the oral cavity the other cancers include that of the thyroid, larynx and pharynx.

Cancers of the thyroid behave quite different than the cancers of the mouth. They may be asymptomatic with the patient presenting with a swelling in the neck, which is slow growing and usually does not produce any symptoms. Once confirmed these usually need to be operated upon.

Patients who have cancers of the Larynx and Hypo pharynx complain of altered voice , difficulty in swallowing and sometimes also develop difficulty in breathing. The treatment of these cancers is mainly surgery followed by radiotherapy. The surgery is extensive and involves removal of entire voice box as well as part of the swallowing tube. After this a reconstruction may be required for improvement of the swallowing of these patients. For speech these patients are fitted with the speaking valve. In certain patients a near normal voice can be achieved. In these cancers too an early diagnosis can make a phenomenal difference as surgery could be avoided and patients can be treated with chemotherapy and radiation only, thereby surgery only kept as stand by.

In my experience of visiting the leading cancer centers of the world I have learnt that the emphasis, world over is to perform surgery to the extent of achieving an optimum tumor control, meanwhile trying the best for a good quality of life of these patients. But all these is only possible if our patients become aware enough to go to the doctor early and not ignore the symptoms till they reach the tolerance. This holds true especially for head and neck cancer as the patients are symptomatic well in advance than the inoperable stage or the advanced stage where very little can be done.