

Tracheal Cancer

What is Tracheal Cancer?

The trachea, also known as the windpipe, is a very complex organ that connects the voice box (larynx) to the lungs. The cells lining the trachea help protect the lungs from inhaled foreign particles.

A variety of benign or malignant tumors can develop in the trachea. These are called primary tracheal tumors. Because of its close relationship to other body organs, such as the thyroid and esophagus, the trachea can also be invaded by tumors that develop elsewhere.

What Causes Tracheal Cancer?

Some types of tracheal cancer are related to smoking while others have no known cause. Tracheal tumors can effect virtually anyone at any age.

What are the Symptoms of Tracheal Cancer?

Symptoms of tracheal cancer are often overlooked and difficult to diagnose. It may be several months or years before a diagnosis is made. Symptoms may include:

- Dry, non-productive cough.
- Occasional coughing up blood.
- Shortness of breath after exercise.
- Hoarseness.
- Uncoordinated swallowing.
- Fever, chills and pneumonia (may be recurrent problems over many months to years).
- Occasional wheezing as the tumor spreads and restricts air flow to the lungs.

How is Tracheal Cancer Diagnosed?

If you experience any of the above symptoms, your doctor will review your medical history and perform a physical exam. He or she may order a chest x-ray, a CT (computerized tomography) scan of the head, neck and chest, an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan and/or a PET (positron emission tomography) scan.

If tracheal cancer is suspected, a bronchoscopy of the larynx, trachea and airways will be performed. During this procedure a thin, flexible tube called a bronchoscope is passed through your nose or mouth down into your airways. The bronchoscope has a light and camera that allow the doctor to see the area. The doctor may also remove a small piece of tissue from the trachea for examination under a microscope. This biopsy will help your doctor determine the location of cancer and how far it has spread.

What is Staging?

Staging is a way to find out where the cancer has spread. This is usually done by diagnostic imaging. Once the stage is determined, your doctor can plan your treatment.

How is Tracheal Cancer Treated?

Surgery is typically required to remove the tumor. Up to half of the trachea can be removed and reattached. Depending on the extent of the cancer, the larynx, lower trachea and/or a lung along with the main airway may also be removed. Radiation and chemotherapy may be used to supplement the treatment.

Where Can I Get More Information?

The Cancer Information Service (CIS) is a program of the National Cancer Institute. Information specialists answer questions about cancer screening tests, risks, symptoms, diagnosis, treatment and support organizations. You can reach CIS specialists at 800.422.6237 or at www.cancer.gov.

The American Cancer Society (ACS) is a voluntary national health organization with local offices around the country. The ACS supports research, provides information about cancer and offers many programs and services to patients and their families. You can reach ACS at 800.227.2345 or at www.cancer.org.