



## Head and Neck Cancer and its Impact on Women

Ritu SK<sup>1\*</sup> and Kaushal S<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of ENT and Head Neck Surgery, Godrej Memorial Hospital and Excel ENT Hospital, India

<sup>2</sup>Consultant ENT and Head Neck Oncosurgeon, Godrej Memorial Hospital and Excel ENT Hospital, India

**\*Corresponding author:** Ritu Sheth MS(ENT), DNB(ENT), Department of ENT and Head Neck Surgery, Godrej Memorial Hospital and Excel ENT Hospital, India, Tel: 9820058896; Email: drritusheth@gmail.com

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### Introduction

HNC is more prevalent in India than in other countries, such as the US, UK, Australia, Africa, and Brazil. The high prevalence of HNC in India is likely due to the widespread use of tobacco, which is a risk factor for 80–90% of oral cancer patients. In India, the number of cancer cases is rising. According to GLOBOCAN 2020, there will be 2.1 million new cancer cases in India by 2040, an increase of 57.5% from the year 2020. The all-site cancer incidence rate was 103.7 and 102.4 per 100,000 population for males and females, respectively. (Ref: e-Cancer, 2023) India has the highest number of oral cavity cancer patients in the world. This could be related to the widespread use of tobacco in India. Tobacco use has been identified as a risk factor in 80 to 90% of patients with oral cancer. Tobacco use in India is characterized by a high prevalence of combustible (in the form of smoking) and smokeless tobacco use, with dual use also contributing a noticeable proportion.

Head and neck cancer (HNC) refers to a group of cancers that develop in the head or neck region, including the oral cavity, pharynx, voice box (larynx), thyroid, and paranasal sinuses. These cancers can have a significant impact on both men and women, but there are specific ways in which women may experience unique challenges related to diagnosis, treatment, and the psychosocial impact of the disease. These challenges can contribute to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and social stigma, all of which can further exacerbate the emotional toll of the disease.

### Prevalence and Risk Factors in Women

- Historically, head and neck cancers have been more common in men due to higher rates of eating tobacco or

its products, smoking and alcohol use, which are major risk factors in the Indian subcontinent. However, the incidence of HNC in women has been rising esp thyroid. Though still the incidence of cervical and breast cancer are still on the top of the list.

- HPV-related head and neck cancers, particularly those affecting the oropharynx (back of the throat), are becoming more common in women, especially in younger, non-smoking populations. HPV is linked to a subset of head and neck cancers and is thought to be a significant factor in the rise of these cancers among women.

The treatment for head and neck cancers often includes surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or a combination of these. These treatments can result in a variety of physical challenges:

### Surgical Impact

Surgical procedures often involve removing parts of the tongue, voice box, or jaw, which can significantly affect speech, swallowing, and facial appearance. Women, in particular, may find these changes particularly distressing due to societal expectations of appearance and femininity. In many cultures, physical appearance is closely tied to a woman's sense of identity and self-worth, making these changes particularly difficult to cope with.

### Radiation and Chemotherapy Side Effects

Radiation treatment can cause dry mouth, difficulty swallowing, changes in taste, and mouth sores, which can significantly impair the quality of life. Chemotherapy may lead to fatigue, hair loss, and other systemic effects.

## Voice Changes

Women may experience particular difficulties with voice changes or loss, as they may rely more on their voice for professional and personal communication.

## Psychosocial Impact

The emotional and psychological impact of head and neck cancer can be especially pronounced for women:

### Body Image

Head and neck cancers of the oral cavity are mainly treated with surgery upfront followed up with radiotherapy. Removal of a part of mandible can affect the facial appearance in a great way. Almost all surgeries are associated with a scar on the face or neck area and removal of the underlying bone for margins. This is unavoidable, esp important in our country where patients come only in the stage 3 or 4. Women experience changes in appearance as a result of surgery, radiation, or other treatments, leading to concerns about body image. Loss of hair, disfigurement, or changes in the voice can result in significant emotional distress, particularly as women may feel societal pressure to maintain a certain aesthetic.

### Speech Impairment

Surgery, radiation, or other treatments for head and neck cancer can impair a woman's ability to speak clearly or at all. This can have profound social implications, as communication is a key part of interacting with others in social, professional, and familial settings. Women may struggle with:

### Voice changes or loss

If the larynx or vocal cords are affected, the woman may experience hoarseness or total loss of voice, which can make it difficult to participate in conversations, express herself, and engage in public or professional life.

### Swallowing difficulties

If swallowing function is impacted, it can affect social activities like dining with others, attending social gatherings, or even talking with ease during casual encounters. These speech or swallowing difficulties may create anxiety around social interactions, as women may avoid situations where they feel their abilities will be scrutinized or where they may have to explain their condition. This can lead to isolation and withdrawal from social life.

### Family and Caregiver Roles

Women, particularly those with children or elderly parents, may also face the challenge of balancing treatment and

caregiving responsibilities. This increases their stress levels and contribute to feelings of isolation and exhaustion. Head and neck cancers, especially those affecting the oral cavity and throat are also associated with a social stigma and they face it at a family level too. Changes in libido can create additional emotional challenges for women. Concerns about altered sexual function or intimacy can lead to a sense of loss or frustration, affecting not only physical intimacy but emotional closeness as well. This can cause women to withdraw from relationships or feel less desirable or disconnected from their partners.

- A woman may struggle with managing household responsibilities, caring for children, or supporting a partner, all of which are crucial aspects of her identity in a family. When illness disrupts these roles, it can cause stress in relationships, particularly if the partner or family members are not fully able or willing to step in and share these responsibilities.

### Workplace Stigma and Discrimination

Women may also face social stigma or discrimination at work due to their appearance or perceived abilities after cancer treatment. This could lead to being overlooked for promotions, job opportunities, or being excluded from social events within the workplace.

### Financial Impact

The financial toll of cancer treatment can also contribute to social stress. Women may need to take time off work for treatments, which could lead to lost income. If they are primary breadwinners or contribute to family finances, this may create additional financial strain, further affecting their overall well-being and social life.

### Diagnosis and Treatment Delays

- Women experience delays in diagnosis compared to men, as they tend to ignore the early signs of cancer. Besides this they are depended on their spouses to seek treatment, which leads to a considerable delay in diagnosis. This can lead to later-stage diagnoses when the cancer may be more advanced and difficult to treat.
- Additionally, symptoms like a sore throat, hoarseness, or ear pain may initially be attributed to other, more common conditions, leading to delays in seeking medical attention.

### Support and Resources

- Women may benefit from specialized support resources, such as psychological counseling, speech therapy, and nutritional support to address the side effects of

treatment. Support groups for women with head and neck cancer can also provide a sense of community and help them navigate the emotional and physical challenges they face.

- Increasing awareness about the growing number of HPV-related head and neck cancers in women, as well as better early detection methods, may help in reducing the impact of this disease on women.

### Outcomes and Survival

- Although survival rates for head and neck cancer have improved in recent years due to advances in treatment, women may face specific challenges in terms of recovery. Since they are the primary caregivers in their families somehow they themselves do not receive sufficient care in their recovery phase. They always feel a need to start their responsibilities thereby denying themselves of enough time to recover themselves. The prolonged treatment of post-operative radiotherapy or chemotherapy in the patients further compounds their problems and they face a challenge even in completing their treatments as advised. The potential risk of recurrence, long-term health issues, and the potential for permanent changes in function and appearance can affect their long-term well-being.
- Additionally, studies have shown that women may experience worse outcomes compared to men in terms

of overall survival and treatment toxicity, though the reasons for this disparity are still being explored, one can only postulate is that maybe this is because of their poor nutritional status esp in our country.

### Conclusion

Head and neck cancer can have a profound impact on women, affecting not only their physical health but also their emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach, including early detection, personalized treatment plans, and psychosocial support. It is also essential to increase awareness, especially about the role of HPV in head and neck cancer, as this can help reduce the burden of disease on women.

The social impact of head and neck cancer on women can be profound and wide-ranging, affecting their sense of self, relationships, family roles, professional life, and mental health. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes not only medical care but also psychological support, social reintegration programs, and the promotion of awareness about the specific needs of women undergoing treatment for head and neck cancer. Support networks, both formal and informal, can play a crucial role in mitigating the social impact, providing a sense of community and helping women maintain their dignity and sense of identity during and after treatment.