Managing suspected head and neck cancer

Resources pack

5 key takeaways

1. **Awareness and recognition of symptoms is key** in the community, general practice, and general dental practice, to support earlier identification of potential head and neck cancers.
2. **Persistent symptoms require face-to-face assessment** with a thorough examination, as remote consultation alone may miss important clinical signs.
3. **Ask about and record risk factors** including all forms of tobacco use such as shisha and paan, as well as alcohol and HPV-related risks where relevant.
4. **Persisting neck nodes (>3 weeks) need urgent assessment** via an urgent suspected cancer pathway Head and Neck clinic, even in the absence of other symptoms or risk factors.
5. **Persistent hoarseness over 3 weeks needs assessment**, especially with a smoking history, and should prompt referral to a Head and Neck clinic.

Suggested quality improvement activities

- **Record and code key risk factors consistently** (including all forms of tobacco such as shisha and paan, alcohol use, and HPV risk) to support clinical decision-making and targeted prevention advice.
- **Audit head and neck cancer referrals and outcomes** to identify earlier opportunities for improved management.
- **Embed safety netting processes in your practice systems** including clear, time-bound advice and text reminders for patients who do not initially meet referral criteria.
- **Strengthen use of practice systems** by coding referrals, documenting safety netting clearly, and setting diary alerts for follow-up
- **Strengthen communication between GPs and dentists** where appropriate to support referrals.
- **Identify and address inequalities in access and help-seeking** by reviewing groups less likely to attend (e.g. deprived populations, non-English speakers) and adapting communication, access, and consultation methods accordingly.

Practical tools and resources for GPs and Dentists

- **The atlas of variation** - This webpage presents data on trends, inequalities, and geographic variation in head and neck cancer incidence, mortality, and late diagnosis across England to support improved prevention and early detection.
- **British Dental Journal collection on head and neck cancer** - This collection brings together research and expert insights on head and neck cancers, covering their

causes, diagnosis, treatment, management, and related healthcare challenges across multiple dental and clinical journals.

- **Delivering better oral health guidance** – The guidance on this webpage emphasises the role dental teams play in early diagnosis, risk reduction, and patient education to improve outcomes.

GPs:

- **Doctors.net Head and neck Toolkit for GPs** (registration required) - The toolkit is a free resource offering information on referral guidelines, an interactive tool to identify key signs and symptoms, and practical reflections and examination videos.

- **CRUK Safety-netting webpages** - This webpage provides guidance, tools, and resources for primary care professionals on safety netting in cancer diagnosis, including what it is, why it matters, key principles, national guidance, addressing inequalities, process improvement, and supporting materials such as our safety-netting flowchart and case studies.
- **CRUK remote consultations webpage** - This webpage outlines the role of remote consultations in primary care, covering their benefits and challenges, inequalities in access, and practical guidance and resources to help health professionals use them effectively for timely cancer diagnosis.
- **CRUK Health Professionalwebpages** - Keep up to date with the latest statistics, evidence and information on diagnosing, treating and preventing cancer. You can also find professional tools, early diagnosis campaigns and resources that can support your work.
- **Article providing advice on assessing oral ulcers and patches in primary care**

Dentists

- **Doctors.net Head and Neck Toolkit for Dentists** – The toolkit is a free resource offering information on referral guidelines, an interactive tool to identify key signs and symptoms, and practical reflections and examination videos.
- **British Dental Association webpage** – Visit the British Dental Associations webpage for advice and learning opportunities, as well as news and membership.
- **British Dental Association article** – *'As a maxillofacial surgeon, I never expected to get mouth cancer myself'.* Read a compelling personal story that highlights the importance of awareness and early diagnosis of mouth cancer.

Resources for your patients

- **CRUK 'About cancer' Head and neck cancer webpage –** accessible information on head and neck cancers for patients and public.
- **Patient self-assessment video** – This webpage provides a clear, step-by-step guide for patients to carry out a monthly, two-minute oral cancer self-examination at home, outlining how to check the face, neck and oral tissues for signs such as lumps, red or white patches, and non-healing ulcers, and when to seek professional advice.