



Cancer of the Larynx

Understanding your diagnosis

This section of the Guide to Your Head and Neck Cancer Treatment explains the function of the larynx and esophagus, and gives basic information about cancer.

You have recently been diagnosed with cancer of the larynx. Included in this section are physical descriptions of the larynx and esophagus, and a definition of cancer. The purpose of this information is to help you understand your diagnosis.

The Larynx and the Esophagus

Larynx

The *larynx*, also called the voice box, is about 2 inches long and shaped like a hollow tube. We use the larynx when we breathe, talk, and swallow.

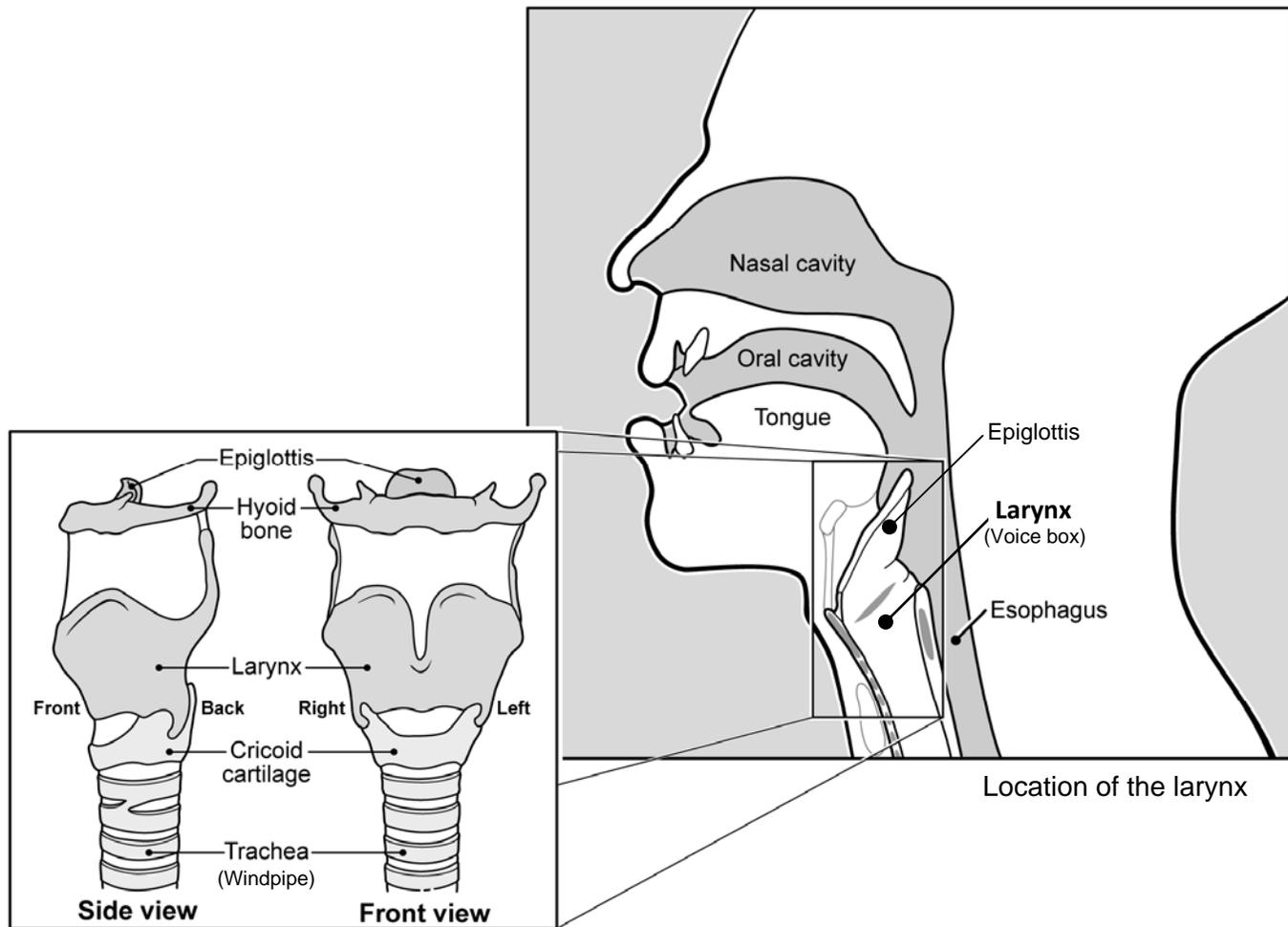
The larynx is at the top of the *trachea* (windpipe). Its walls are made of *cartilage*, a flexible but firm type of body tissue. The vocal cords, which are 2 bands of muscle in the shape of a “V,” are inside the larynx.

When we breathe in and out, the vocal cords are relaxed. This allows air to pass easily in and out of our airway. When we talk, the vocal cords tighten and vibrate as air from the lungs is forced through the opening. This produces the sound of our voice. The tongue, teeth, and lips form this sound into words.

Esophagus

The *esophagus* is behind the larynx and trachea. It is the tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach.

The openings of the larynx and esophagus are very close together. A flap of tissue called the *epiglottis* covers the larynx when we swallow. This keeps food from going into our airway.



The larynx and other nearby structures

What is cancer?

Cancer occurs when normal cells change and grow in a way that cannot be controlled, becoming cancer cells. The type of cancer is defined by the kind of cancer cell and where it is found within the body.

Our bodies usually create new cells only when our body needs them. When our body makes abnormal cells, a *mass* of excess tissue forms. This is called a *growth* or *tumor*. This growth can be *benign* or *malignant*.

- A **benign** tumor is not cancer. It usually will not spread to other parts of the body.
- A **malignant** tumor is made of cancer cells. It invades healthy tissue and organs. It can destroy healthy tissue, enter the bloodstream and lymphatic system, and spread to other parts of the body.

Questions?

Call 206-598-4022

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC staff are also available to help.

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Laryngeal Cancer

Cancer of the larynx (*laryngeal cancer*) occurs when an abnormal growth of cells in the larynx area forms a mass or tumor. It can form either at the epiglottis or above or below the vocal cords.

If the cancer spreads outside the larynx, it often goes to the lymph nodes in the neck. It can also spread to other areas within the head and neck area and the lungs.

Symptoms of Laryngeal Cancer

Symptoms of laryngeal cancer include:

- Hoarse voice or change in voice quality
- Ongoing cough
- Feeling of having a lump in the throat

A larger tumor can cause:

- Throat pain
- Difficulty swallowing food and fluids
- Weight loss

A tumor above the vocal cords can cause:

- A lump at the neck
- Sore throat
- Earache

A tumor below the vocal cords can cause:

- Difficulty with breathing (caused by narrowing of the airway)

Contact Information

University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC) Patients

- Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call the Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery Center at 206-598-4022.
- After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206-598-6190 and ask for the Otolaryngology resident on call to be paged.

Harborview Medical Center (HMC) Patients

- Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., call 206-744-3770.
- After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206-744-3000 and ask for the Otolaryngology resident on call to be paged.

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