Sharon and her granddaughter

Head and Neck Cancer Program
AT SMILOW CANCER HOSPITAL AT YALE-NEW HAVEN
The Head and Neck Cancer Program at Smilow Cancer Hospital provides total care for patients diagnosed with cancers of the head and neck. We offer dedicated attention, innovative and organ-sparing treatment options, and cutting-edge research, coupled with the recognized excellence of a National Cancer Institute-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center. By carefully balancing treatment efficacy with quality-of-life, our collaborative approach to care personalizes treatment options for tumors affecting the neck, larynx (voice box), pharynx (throat), oral cavity (mouth), ear, sinuses, tonsils, and salivary glands, as well as cervical (neck) lymph nodes or neck structures.

Dr. Wendell Yarbrough (surgery) and Dr. Barbara Burtness (medical oncology) lead a multidisciplinary group of healthcare professionals focused on head and neck cancers that includes: head and neck surgeons, radiation oncologists, medical oncologists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, nutritionists, a smoking cessation specialist, dentists, a physical/lymphedema therapist, advanced practice nurses, and social workers. Given the effects of cancers of the head and neck region and their treatment on swallowing and speech, as well as appearance, a team approach is critical to attain the highest cure rates while maximizing post-treatment function. All physicians are board-certified and fellowship-trained.

At Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale-New Haven, patients benefit from the expertise of a team approach to cancer care. The Head and Neck multidisciplinary team meets in a weekly Tumor Board Conference to review cases and offer patients the best treatment plans focused on providing the most comprehensive, effective, and personalized care possible. Optimal care plans are based on the most up-to-date research performed at Yale and elsewhere.
LESS INVASIVE SURGERIES; RECONSTRUCTIVE BREAKTHROUGHS

One of the most exciting new surgical advances is the use of new techniques for tumor removal that avoid neck incisions and preserve function. Transoral robotic surgery (TORS) can be used to remove certain throat cancers while avoiding skin and bone incisions. This approach speeds healing and shortens a patient’s hospital stay.

Likewise, patients with certain laryngeal cancers, who a few years ago would have lost their vocal cords and their voices, can often be treated with less invasive surgeries. Patients who undergo these treatments maintain their ability to speak, although they may need to alter their diet or learn new swallowing techniques. At Yale, rehabilitative specialists, led by Steven Leder, PhD, work with patients to help them adjust to and overcome some of these swallowing impairments.

In many cases radical neck dissections have been replaced by less radical surgeries that preserve the nerves, arteries, and muscles in the neck. Patients continue to move, speak, breathe, and eat normally after less radical surgeries, but without sacrificing cure rates.

Breakthroughs in reconstructive surgery represent one of the biggest success stories for head and neck cancer patients. Reconstructive surgery has improved dramatically, yielding previously unattainable cosmetic and functional outcomes. Patients have better outcomes when complex surgical procedures, like these reconstructions, are done by experienced specialists who perform them on a regular basis.

“My wife, my children, my mother, my doctors, and my therapists have all helped me recover.”

Alberto, throat cancer survivor.
MEDICAL ONCOLOGY
The integration of chemotherapy with radiation has become very important for patients with head and neck cancer that involves the lymph nodes or is locally extensive, and this approach can lead to organ preservation and increase the chance of cure for many patients. Breakthroughs in targeted therapy and biomarkers allow a personalized approach that can avoid the toxicities of conventional chemotherapy in some cases, and new treatments to prevent recurrence in high-risk situations are also under study. For patients with recurrent disease, new anti-cancer drugs and immunotherapies are also available.

Led by Dr. Barbara Burtness, the medical oncology team at Smilow Cancer Hospital continues to study innovative new treatments, and our patients have the opportunity to receive such novel therapies through exciting clinical trials only available at our Hospital. Yale medical oncologists have unique expertise in head and neck cancers. In addition, our medical oncologists are happy to see patients for a second opinion.

RADIATION ONCOLOGY
Radiation is critical for cure of almost all advanced head and neck cancers. Radiation therapy can be delivered alone or combined with chemotherapy as a primary therapy or after surgical therapy. Led by Dr. Zain Husain, new radiation techniques that precisely aim beams to target tumors are very important for patients with head and neck tumors since crucial structures are often very close to the tumors. Intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT) effectively targets the tumor while simultaneously minimizing damage to normal tissues.

Clinical trials are currently testing whether the overall dose of radiation can be reduced in certain patients who are extremely treatment responsive. Novel agents to sensitize cancer cells to radiation and to maintain treatment responses are also under study.

PATIENT INTAKE AND SUPPORT SERVICES
Our intake specialists will ensure that you have everything you need for your first visit with our team, and that your appointments are coordinated to speed initiation of therapy and to fit your busy schedule. In addition, our team extends to a myriad of essential services including social work, pastoral support, dietary and nutritional aid, physical therapy, complementary therapy, pain management, and psychosocial support. Smilow Cancer Hospital also offers a state-of-the-art Survivorship Clinic that employs a multidisciplinary team approach designed to optimally address patients’ needs after treatment ends.

We recognize that each medical problem is significant, that seeking therapy is difficult, and that therapy can be scary. We are continually amazed by the courage of our patients, and this courage reminds us that our highest priority is to provide the best patient experience throughout the entire care process.

Dr. Wendell Yarbrough

Dr. Wendell Yarbrough
CLINICAL TRIALS AND RESEARCH
We are committed to not only providing you with the very best care today, but are dedicated to cutting-edge research and innovative therapies that will advance the standard of care tomorrow. Our doctors and nurses not only work hand-in-hand with Yale Cancer Center scientists to find the answers to cancer, cracking genomic codes that will lead to better therapies, less toxicity, and one day, a cure, they also frequently lead these research efforts. You can be part of this revolution. Patients undergoing a biopsy procedure or surgery can elect to donate removed cancer tissue or cells to the Head and Neck Biospecimen Repository to advance discovery of new therapies.

Patients who participate in clinical trials tend to do better than those receiving standard therapies. By participating in clinical trials or the biospecimen repository, patients can help us move the field forward for others. Ask your oncologist which clinical trials might be right for you, and how you can participate.

“Without the comfort and care Yale gave to my family and me, this would have been a completely different experience.”

Eric, tongue cancer survivor.
HOW TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT
For more information or to schedule an appointment with a member of the Head and Neck Cancer Program, please contact our patient intake coordinators at (203) 200-4622. They will provide you with assistance during your diagnosis, treatment, and recovery and our nurse coordinator can help answer questions that you may have. Our goal is to ensure that each patient has an outstanding and positive cancer care experience.

When you call, a patient intake coordinator will help to arrange your appointments so that you will see all of the specialists needed during an initial visit.

WHAT TO BRING TO YOUR FIRST APPOINTMENT
For your first visit, our intake specialist will work with you and your doctors to attain all available imaging, pathology, doctor’s referral notes, and the results of any other pertinent tests or consultations.

p: (203) 200-4622
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