Head and Neck Cancer Treatment Side Effects

*Acute, late or long term effects of cancer treatment can vary greatly depending on the type of surgery, chemotherapy and the areas included in the field of radiation therapy.

**SURGERY**
- Head and neck surgery can injure nerves. This may cause pain, numbness, tingling, or weakness in your arms, fingers, legs, or toes.
- Chewing, swallowing, talking, or breathing may be harder for you
- You might inhale food or liquids into your lungs, which can lead to pneumonia
- Movement of your neck may be limited
- You may have changes in your hearing and how things taste or smell
- Your voice may change

**RADIATION**
- Exposing healthy skin, muscle, and bone to radiation might cause other cancers
- Follow your doctor’s advice to check for any signs of cancer

- **EYES**
  - Radiation therapy can cause cataracts to form
  - See an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) if your eyesight changes, if things look blurry, it is harder for you to see at night, if you see things in double, or if you see circles or halos around objects
  - Have your eyes checked every one to five years. Have your eyes checked right away if your eyesight changes.

- **MUSCLES, BONES, JOINTS**
  - Radiation may cause your soft tissues and muscles to scar or shrink under the skin. This can affect how easily your body can move
  - Swelling in your neck can occur and may harden over time. Massaging this area may help reduce the swelling. Please tell your doctor if your face or neck swelling becomes concerning to you or discomforting.
  - Radiation may cause arthritis in your neck. It also can make it easier for your bones or joints to break (fracture).
  - Trismus or the inability to fully open your jaw can occur after radiation therapy. This occurs by a combination of spasm, fibrosis and contraction of the muscles responsible for movement at your jaw joint or temporomandibular joint (TMJ). Please see your doctor if you are having trouble opening your mouth.
  - See your doctor if you have any new back or neck pain
  - Radiation to your neck and throat can cause scarring or swelling. This may make it harder for you to speak, swallow, or breathe. Please talk to your doctor if you have these symptoms.

- **OSTEORADIONECROSIS** (oss’tee-oh-ray’-dee-oh-neh-kro’-sis)
  - Radiation treatment can cause a wound of your jaw or bone that won’t heal. This is called osteoradionecrosis.
- This can cause pain, swelling, and your jaw may be hard to move. See your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms.
- Take good care of your teeth and mouth. See your dentist regularly.
- Poor dental care may increase your risk of late complications, such as osteoradionecrosis and infections
- Let your dentist know you had radiation treatment for a head and neck cancer before having any teeth pulled or any major dental procedures.
- You may need to contact your Radiation Oncologist before having any teeth pulled or any major dental procedures

- **LYMPH NODES**
  - Radiation to lymph nodes or having lymph nodes removed can cause swelling (lymphedema)
  - Massaging the swollen area can help with the pain and discomfort.
  - Please contact your doctor if the swelling and discomfort continue or becomes worse.

- **STROKE**
  - Radiation could cause injury to your carotid artery and narrow your veins and arteries
  - You may be more at risk for an ischemic stroke or carotid artery stenosis (narrowing of the artery). A past history of smoking and elevated cholesterol levels can also increase your risk of a stroke.
  - Make lifestyle choices that are good for your heart and arteries – limit the amount of fat you eat, eat a balanced diet, and exercise regularly
  - Have your blood pressure and cholesterol checked every year

- **TEETH AND SALIVA GLANDS**
  - Radiation can make it hard for your mouth to make spit (saliva). This is called xerostomia or dry mouth.
  - Dry mouth can make it harder for you to eat and speak
  - It can cause tooth decay and cavities
  - Dry mouth can cause tenderness and infection of your gums
  - See your dentist regularly, every six to 12 months
  - Fluoride treatments can help protect your teeth

- **THYROID**
  - Radiation treatments near your thyroid can cause thyroid disease, nodules, or thyroid cancer
  - Your doctor may want lab tests (thyroid-stimulating hormone or TSH) and/or an ultrasound

**CHEMOTHERAPY**
- Exposing your body to chemotherapy can damage normal cells
- Chemotherapy can cause effects that can last for a short or long time, or can appear long after treatment is finished
- Some chemotherapy can hurt cells in your brain, heart, bone marrow, ears, skin and nerves.

- **COGNITIVE or “Chemo-brain”**
  - Chemotherapy can cause problems with short-term memory, trying to do more than one thing at a time, learning new things, understanding what you read, working with numbers, and having trouble concentrating
  - Some cognitive abilities can improve over time, but deficits can continue in many long term survivors.
- **HEART**
  - Chemotherapy can affect your heart, blood pressure, cholesterol, and may narrow your veins and arteries.
  - You may be more at risk for cardiac events such as a heart attack (myocardial infarction) or angina (chest pain).
  - Make lifestyle choices that are good for your heart – limit the amount of fat you eat, eat a balanced diet, and exercise regularly.
  - Have your blood pressure, cholesterol, and a complete blood count with differential (CBC with diff) checked every year.

- **BLOOD**
  - Some chemotherapy medicine can hurt the blood cells in your bone marrow.
  - This can cause blood cancers, leukemia or myelodysplasia, even years after you finish your treatment.
  - Have a complete blood cell count with differential (CBC with diff) checked every year.

- **NERVES**
  - Chemotherapy can irritate or hurt your nerves. This is called peripheral neuropathy.
  - You may feel numbness, tingling, or burning.
  - You may have a feeling of heaviness or weakness in your fingers, arms, toes, or legs.
  - These symptoms may show up during chemotherapy treatment. Tell your UI medical oncologist or UI head and neck survivorship provider if you have any of these symptoms at any time.

**CHEMORADIATION THERAPY**

- **EARS**
  - The chemotherapy medicine, Cisplatin, may cause hearing loss, ringing in your ears (tinnitus), or a feeling of spinning or losing your balance (vertigo). This can happen during or after treatment is finished.
  - Radiation can make your ear canals dry and can cause fluid to collect in your inner ears.
  - If you hearing changes, have it tested with a hearing test (audiogram).

- **SKIN**
  - Some chemotherapy medicines and radiation treatments may cause your skin, hair, or nails to change. This can happen during or after treatment.
  - You may see a “bronzing” look in the area that received radiation treatment.
  - The area may become red, dry, tender, and itchy.
  - Wash your skin with water and mild soap.
  - Use a moisturizing lotion for dry or scaly skin.
  - Protect all open sores or wounds.
  - Use sunscreen when you are outdoors.
  - See a dermatologist if you have changes in your skin.

**SURGERY and CHEMORADIATION THERAPY**

- **FATIGUE**
  - Fatigue may be worse during treatment but can persist in some survivors after completing treatment.
  - Avoid fatigue by getting enough sleep at night, incorporating physical activity into your life and eating a healthy diet may be helpful.
  - Let your doctor know if your fatigue is worsening.
DISTRESS OR EMOTIONAL CHANGES
- Your quality of life can be changed because of cancer and its treatment
- Depression and anxiety are common.
- Please talk with your doctor if you are having trouble coping with everyday life, are more worried or upset, depressed, or having mood changes.