

## **Speech Therapy Intervention for Patients with Head and Neck Cancer**

Each year, more than 60,000 Americans are diagnosed with head and neck cancer. Your treatment plan may include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy or a combination of all three as prescribed by your physicians.

Following the treatment of oral, head and neck cancer, you may experience changes in the appearance of your face and neck, speech, sight, smell, chewing, swallowing and taste.

As part of your comprehensive cancer treatment team, your physician may recommend you be seen by a speech language pathologist. A speech language pathologist or speech therapist specializes in the prevention and rehabilitation of changes to speech, voice, cognition and swallowing ability.

People who have been treated for head and neck cancer often experience swallowing problems (dysphagia) and difficulty with their speech. The seriousness of the swallowing and speech problems depends on the type and nature of treatment, the size and location of the tumor, and the nature of any reconstruction.

### **Problems related to swallowing after head and neck cancer:**

- Difficulty chewing solid food
- Difficulty initiating a swallow
- Delayed swallow reflex
- Pain or dryness when swallowing
- Coughing or choking while eating or drinking
- Reflux or backflow

### **Problems related to speech after head and neck cancer:**

- Reduced ability to voice
- Hypernasality
- Reduced speech clarity (dysarthria)
- Changes to the timing and control of the breath support system

### **Other problems:**

- Reduced sensation to the lips and tongue
- Nausea
- Poor appetite
- Altered taste
- Dentition loss

### **Specific treatment strategies and services provided by your speech therapist may include:**

- Advocacy and collaboration with your interdisciplinary cancer team
- Education and preparation for changes to come prior to treatment
- Muscle range of motion and strengthening exercises (pre and post treatment)
- Assistive or alternative communication devices
- Compensatory strategies
- Head posturing techniques
- Modifying diet consistencies
- Safe-swallow techniques
- Voice therapy