

Neck Dissection

What is in the neck?

The neck contains many important structures:

- (1) The carotid artery and internal jugular vein carry blood to and from the brain, respectively.
- (2) The airway, voice box, and food tube are all contained.
- (3) Nerves that function in voice production, swallowing, and tongue, shoulder, mouth, and chest movement are all in the neck.
- (4) Important glands in the neck include the submandibular (spit) gland, thyroid gland, and parathyroid glands. In addition, there are muscles that move the neck and throat, and fat. Lymph nodes, as well as the major channels through which lymph fluid flows, are also found in the neck.

When is surgery needed?

Surgery is performed for three major reasons:

- (1) To find out if a tumor or cancer of the head or neck has spread. This allows better staging of the cancer and subsequent treatment.
- (2) To treat the spread of cancer from the head and neck once it has gone into the lymph nodes.
- (3) To remove a mass to establish a diagnosis.

What happens at surgery?

The fat and lymph nodes are removed from one or both sides of the neck. Depending on the extent of disease present, skin, muscle, the internal jugular vein, and/or the spinal accessory nerve to the shoulder may also need to be removed.

What can I expect after surgery?

- (1) Pain can be expected, and how much varies with individuals and the specific operation.
- (2) There will be a scar along the neck. This can take up to a year to fully heal.
- (3) Temporary numbness of the skin around the ear and incision is common, and some may be permanent.
- (4) The appearance of the neck operated on will appear less full in comparison to the opposite side.
- (5) Fluid may collect in the neck that requires drainage; this may be either blood or lymph fluid.
- (6) Nerve damage may occur resulting in loss or lessening of function in terms of tongue movement, shoulder movement, chest movement, and corner of the mouth movement. This may be temporary or permanent.
- (7) Hoarseness and/or difficulty swallowing may also occur. These are infrequent.
- (8) Infection may occur but is uncommon.
- (9) The tumor or cancer may recur in the neck.
- (10) Major bleeding, stroke, and death are all possible complications, although rare.