



# MedStar National Rehabilitation Network Fact Sheet

# Head and Neck Cancer Rehabilitation Program

**Our team approach  
to therapy helps  
patients cope  
with troubling  
side-effects of  
cancer—and its  
treatment.**

## **Unique Collaborative Approach**

Head and neck cancer is the term used to identify a number of malignancies, including cancer of the mouth, nose, throat, and salivary glands. According to the American Cancer Society, each year more than 45,000 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with head and neck cancer.

There are multiple causes for these cancers, but risk increases in people who use tobacco products, especially chewing tobacco, drink alcohol to excess, who are infected with human papilloma virus (HPV), or are exposed to certain chemicals.

Treatment for head and neck cancers will vary from individual to individual and may include surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy, alone or in combination.

Rehabilitation is a critical part of recovery, as most patients suffer from a number of conditions resulting from the disease process that ultimately impact their day-to-day functioning. At MedStar National Rehabilitation Network (MedStar NRH), a team of rehabilitation experts works collaboratively to help patients cope with these medical issues.

The team brings together the expertise of Eric Wisotzky, MD, and an expert team of physical therapists and speech-language pathologists, who have extensive experience in cancer rehabilitation.

The MedStar NRH team works hand-in-hand with surgeons, otolaryngologists, radiation oncologists, medical oncologists and patients to develop a plan of care to help manage or prevent side effects.

## **Common Medical Issues**

Radiation therapy is the most common form of treatment for head and neck cancer—and a major source of medical complications. While it may prove effective in destroying cancer cells, it can also damage healthy cells in the treatment area. Many patients develop scarring in the area of radiation, called radiation fibrosis, that results in the thickening of skin—and tightness of muscles.

Surgery to remove cancerous tissue and chemotherapy to kill cancer cells can result in difficult side effects, as well.

Common complications include:

- Altered texture of the skin
- Trismus—difficulty opening the jaw

- TMJ—Temporomandibular joint dysfunction that can cause pain when the jaw is opened
- Xerostomia—dryness in the mouth
- Dysphagia—problems chewing or swallowing due to muscle weakness or changes in structures of the face, mouth and pharynx after surgery
- Dysarthria—difficulty speaking clearly due to muscle weakness or changes in the structures of the face, mouth and pharynx after surgery
- Dysgeusia—reduced or altered sense of taste
- Mucositis—painful inflammation and ulceration in the lining the mouth or digestive tract
- Cervical dystonia—neck muscle spasms, pain, or posture change
- Lymphedema—swelling in the face or neck
- Headaches and migraines
- Posture abnormalities, shoulder problems
- Cancer related fatigue
- Cognitive challenges, such as reduced attention, mental sharpness, as a result of chemotherapy
- Neuropathy—chemotherapy induced nerve pain, tingling, numbness, or impaired balance

## **Personalized Assessment**

The hallmark of the program is its interdisciplinary framework that begins with a comprehensive medical evaluation by Dr. Wisotzky. Dr. Wisotzky and the team of cancer rehabilitation specialists come together using state-of-the-art evaluation techniques to assess the multifaceted medical issues that are the hallmark of head and neck cancer. Then the team integrates evaluation findings to develop innovative treatment plans for their clients.

## **Medical Interventions**

Dr. Wisotzky will typically prescribe a comprehensive rehabilitation program of physical and/or speech therapy designed to address the primary problems that are impeding patients' ability to perform daily tasks.

In addition, Dr. Wisotzky may prescribe:

- Rehabilitation equipment to enhance function
- Oral or topical medications to decrease pain and/or spasms
- Injections for musculoskeletal pain or spasm, such as anesthetic, corticosteroid or botulinum toxin



## Physical Therapy

A number of physical therapy techniques will be employed depending on a patient's unique functional problems. These may include:

- Manual therapy and techniques to relax tissue, increase range of motion and decrease pain
- Therapeutic exercise to improve strength in the jaw, cervical spine and shoulder, increase range of motion and improve posture
- Lymphedema management including lymphatic massage, exercises, patient education, and compression garment recommendations
- Techniques to improve soft tissue mobility for range of motion and communication in patients with TMJ
- Pain management, including electrical stimulation and gentle neck traction to minimize pain at the surgical site and surrounding structures
- Aquatic therapy in a heated pool to assist with range of motion, stretches and pain management

## Communication, Swallowing and Cognition

For patients suffering from issues related to communication, swallowing and cognition, speech-language pathologists will develop a plan of therapy that may include:

- Techniques to help patients produce speech more clearly, naturally and confidently
- Strategies to promote safe swallowing of liquids, food and medication
- Exercises to increase range of motion and decrease pain
- Use of a splinting device to reduce pain and increase mobility
- Use of augmentative and alternative modes of communication, such as an electrolarynx, electronic devices, or other aids
- Methods to manage concerns about memory or other thinking skills

## The Head and Neck Cancer Rehabilitation Team

**Eric Wisotzky, MD**, is associate director of Cancer Rehabilitation at the Medstar National Rehabilitation Hospital. He completed his residency in Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation at New York Presbyterian Hospital, where he served as Chief Resident. He also received specialized training in cancer rehabilitation at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and is co-editor of the upcoming NRH Press book, *Managing Breast Cancer: A Guide to Living Well through Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*.

**Yvonne Francis, PT, MBA, CLT, STAR-C**, is a MedStar NRH physical therapist who works extensively with cancer rehabilitation patients. She lec-

tures on the topic at Howard University Physical Therapy School, is actively involved with the cancer advocacy organization the D.C. Cancer Consortium, and is published in professional journals on the role of physical therapy in breast cancer recovery.

**Denise J. Frankoff, M.A.CCC, SLP, PhD**, is a MedStar NRH speech-language pathologist. She works with a team of speech-language pathologists who are highly trained to provide a comprehensive range of services for patients with head and neck cancer who may have problems with communication, swallowing and cognitive skills.

### Call to schedule an appointment:

Eric Wisotzky, MD: 202-877-1621

Yvonne Francis, Physical Therapy: 202-877-1760

Denise J. Frankoff, Speech-Language Pathology: 202-877-1440

## About MedStar National Rehabilitation Network

The MedStar National Rehabilitation Network (MedStar NRH) is a regional system of rehabilitation care that offers inpatient, day treatment and outpatient services in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Northern Virginia.

The Network's interdisciplinary team of rehabilitation experts provides comprehensive services to help people recover as fully as possible following illness and injury. Rehabilitation medicine specialists, physical and occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists work hand-in-hand with patients and other physician specialists to design treatment plans tailored to each patient's unique needs. Rehabilitation plans feature a team approach to therapy and include the use of state-of-the-art technology and advanced medical treatment.

Special programs focus on rehabilitation from cancer, sports injury, concussion, back and neck pain, hand and upper extremity problems, work injuries, arthritis, stroke, brain injury, spinal cord injury and other orthopaedic and neurologic problems.

Services are provided at more than 30 convenient outpatient locations throughout the region. Inpatient and day treatment programs are provided at MedStar National Rehabilitation Hospital, which is consistently ranked by physicians in *U.S. News & World Report* as one of America's "Best Hospitals" for Rehabilitation, is fully accredited by The Joint Commission, the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), with CARF accredited specialty programs for Spinal Cord Injury, Brain Injury and Stroke.

For more on MedStar NRH and to find a location near you, log on to [MedStarNRH.org](http://MedStarNRH.org).