

NASOPHARYNGEAL CANCER PREVENTION AND SCREENING

Cancer Prevention Series 8

Nasopharynx is a centrally located region in the head, between the posterior part of the nasal passage and the soft palate, and is connected to the pharynx underneath.

Nasopharyngeal Cancer is a malignant tumor in the nasopharynx. It is the most common head and neck cancer in Hong Kong.

Am I at risk of nasopharyngeal cancer?

Risk factors of nasopharyngeal cancer include:

- First degree relatives (including parents, siblings, and children) of a nasopharyngeal cancer patient
- Prolonged and high intake of Chinese-style salted fish
- Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) Infection
- Smoking
- Occupational exposure to wood dust and formaldehyde

What are the common symptoms of nasopharyngeal cancer?

Early stage of nasopharyngeal cancer usually has no symptoms and may not be easily noticed.

Common symptoms include:

- Stuffiness
- Nose bleeding or blood stained sputum
- Decreased hearing
- Tinnitus
- Recurrent ear infection
- Neck lump
- Unexplained headache
- Facial paralysis
- Double vision
- Hoarseness
- Difficulty in swallowing

You should see a doctor as soon as possible if you develop any of the above symptoms.

How to reduce the chance of getting nasopharyngeal cancer?

- No smoking 
- Avoid eating Chinese-style salted fish, especially during early childhood 
- Minimise occupational exposure of carcinogenic substances by adhering to occupational safety and health rules including the use of protective gear where appropriate



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What is nasopharyngeal cancer screening?

The purpose of nasopharyngeal cancer screening is to detect nasopharyngeal cancer before it gives rise to symptoms, so that early treatment can be initiated. EBV IgA serology and EBV DNA testing are currently available screening tools. However, these tests are not 100% accurate and there is lack of evidence in their cost-effectiveness for screening population at average risk.

Should I get screened for nasopharyngeal cancer?

Based on available international and local scientific evidence, the Government's Cancer Expert Working Group on Cancer Prevention and Screening has made the following recommendations on nasopharyngeal cancer screening for local population:

Prevention

- All individuals are recommended to adopt a healthy lifestyle, including no smoking and healthy eating (including the avoidance of Chinese-style salted fish especially during early childhood).

For asymptomatic population at average risk

- There is insufficient evidence to recommend a population-based nasopharyngeal cancer (NPC) screening programme using Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) IgA serology or EBV DNA testing.

For asymptomatic persons at increased risk

- Persons at increased risk, such as middle-aged adults with first degree relative having NPC are advised to seek advice from doctors before making an informed decision about screening by EBV IgA serology or EBV DNA testing.