



NASOPHARYNGEAL CANCER PREVENTION AND SCREENING

Cancer Prevention Series 8

The nasopharynx is the upper part of the throat that lies behind the nose and under the skull.

Nasopharyngeal cancer results from abnormal growth of cells in the nasopharynx. It is the commonest head and neck cancer in Hong Kong.

Am I at risk of nasopharyngeal cancer?

Risk factors of nasopharyngeal cancer include:

- Family history of nasopharyngeal cancer
- Smoking
- High intake of preserved and fermented food e.g. salted fish
- Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) Infection
- Occupational exposure to wood dust, formaldehyde and chemical fumes
- Practice of burning incense sticks
- Immunocompromised state

How to reduce the chance of getting nasopharyngeal cancer?

- Do not smoke and avoid second hand smoke
- Avoid eating preserved and fermented food e.g. salted fish
- Observe occupational safety and health rules including proper use of protective equipment to reduce exposure to carcinogenic substances in workplaces
- Avoid burning incense sticks

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 serology test is currently the most commonly used screening tool. However this is not 100% accurate and there is lack of evidence in its effectiveness for screening persons at average risk.



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:

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

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



Should I get screened?

At present, there is insufficient evidence to recommend population-based nasopharyngeal cancer screening in Hong Kong. You should discuss with your doctor for full information on potential benefits and risks of having the screening test for an informed choice.

Family members of nasopharyngeal cancer patients should see a doctor about the need of screening.



Department of Health