

CANCER BEHIND THE NOSE: The Commonest of the head and Neck

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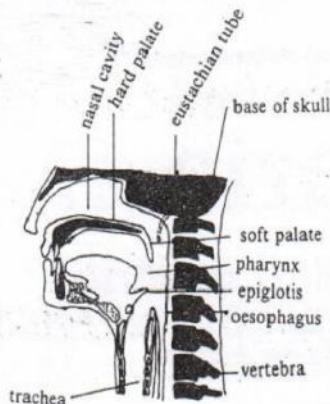
By Dr. Julius A. Ogeng'o

Cancerous growths in a small space behind the nose called the *post-nasal space* are the most common cancers of the head and neck. In this article, they are referred to as post-nasal space (PNS) cancers. On international scale Kenya ranks third in the occurrence of post-nasal space cancers, next to China and Malaysia.

PNS cancers occur more commonly in males than in females and although the peak age is 35-55 years, no age is exempted. Indeed, cases have been reported in children below 10 years. Non-cancerous growths occur more commonly in boys aged 9-15 years but since these account for only about 10%, they will not be discussed in this article. Before going into details, I shall briefly review the position and surrounding structures of the post-nasal space as this is paramount to the understanding of the signs and symptoms of the disease.

The post-nasal space is found in the uppermost part of the back of the mouth (pharynx), immediately behind the nasal cavity. Thus, in front it is

Diagram showing the Postal Nasal Space



Dr. Ogeng'o: "PNS cancers occur more commonly in females."

continuous with the cavity of the nose and below with the rest of the pharynx. Above the post nasal space is the base of the skull within which are parts of the brain, and behind is the uppermost part of the backbone. In front and above are the eyes and on the sides the main vessels of the head and brain. The Eustachian tube opens into the side of this space.

Causes and predisposing factors

The exact cause of post-nasal space cancer is not known but the following factors have been implicated:

Race: This factor is suspected on the account that China has the highest incidence, especially in Canton Province. Thus, a genetic factor may be involved.

Vegetable dust: This cancer occurs more commonly among workers in the wood industry and it may be related to chronic exposure to saw dust.

Viral infections: Higher incidences are associated with infections due to a virus called the Epstein Barr Virus and there may be a possible causal

relationship, yet unproven.

Signs and symptoms

These depend on the position of origin and the mode of spread. This cancer spreads by the three main modes, namely, directly; by lymphatics or through the blood stream.

Directly, it can spread upwards to affect the brain, in front to affect the nose, behind to affect some nerves from the brain, and the Eustachian tubes. Lymphatic spread is the most common and leads to enlargement of the lymph nodes in the side of the neck. In fact in over 80% of the cases, the first complaint may be swollen lymph nodes in the neck. Once this cancer reaches the blood stream, the organs commonly affected are the backbone, the brain, the lungs and the liver. Thus, common complaints include:



Photograph of a man with an enlarged lymph, possibly due to PNS cancer.

- Difficulty in swallowing
- Excessive salivation
- Altered speech
- Nasal obstruction
- Nasal discharge and nasal bleeding

Difficulty in breathing
 Loss of smell
 Protrusion of the eyeball
 Partial or total blindness
 Restriction of eye movement
 Pain in the ear
 Ringing sounds in the ear
 Deafness
 General wasting and Anaemia

Diagnosis

A detailed history of geographical origin, occupation, symptoms and findings on physical examination arouse suspicion which may be confirmed by x-rays taken in special positions. Examination under anaesthesia during which time a small piece of material is taken from the growing mass for microscopic examination by a specialist is about the best way of determining the exact type of growth.

Alternative diagnosis

Many patients with post nasal space cancer present with swollen lymph nodes in the neck but NOT ALL patients with enlarged lymph nodes have post nasal space cancer. Other causes include:-

- Cancer of lymphoid organs, called lymphomas
- Tuberculosis
- Cancer of the blood, called Leukemia
- Infections of wounds in the head and neck region
- Generalized viral infections of some types
- AIDS.

The only way to be sure is to consult your doctor who will take a piece of the lymph node for microscopic examination. Similarly, other diseases of the ear, nose and throat which are not cancerous can resemble post-nasal space cancer and again only the doctor can tell one from the other.

Treatment

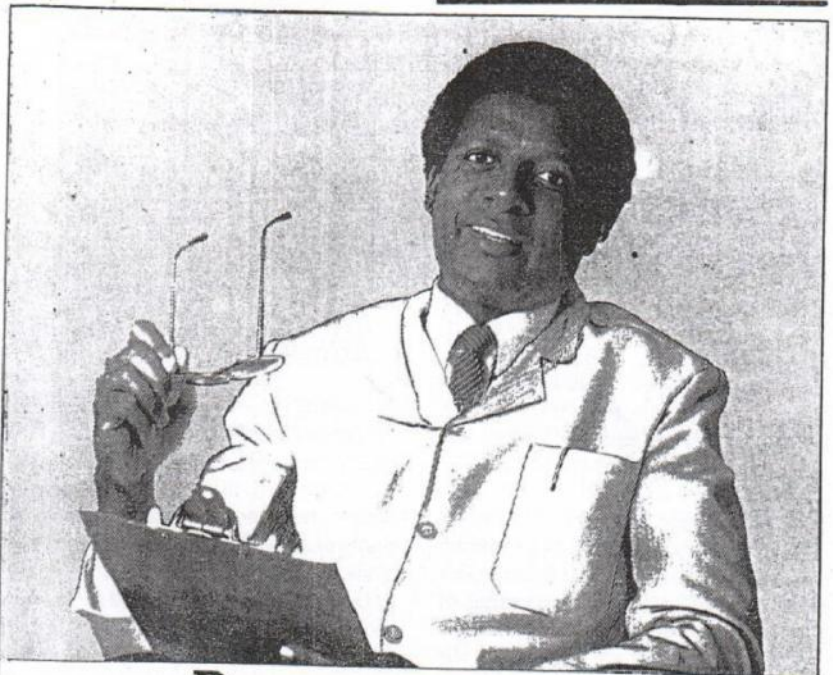
The position and surroundings of the post-nasal space makes it too hidden for early surgery and the treatment of choice in early cases is by means of special 'x-ray' though treatment with

drugs is also useful. Very little can be said in terms of prevention as little is known of its causes.

Outcome

Unfortunately, in the late stages; this is generally poor and in five years after treatment only 10-25% of the victims still survive, though in some countries 40% may survive. However, with recent advances in surgery, x-ray and drug treatment if detected early, it may be

possible to improve the quality of life or even cure in many cases completely. The main causes of death in these cancers are extension to the brain, airway obstruction; extension into and erosion of the carotid arteries which are the source of blood to the brain, chronic anaemia due to persistent blood loss from cancer site and the general wasting of cancerous diseases. Therefore, if you have features suggestive of post-nasal space cancer or you know a person with such symptoms, consult a doctor now for there are specialists who can help you!



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