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## **“Diagnostic Delays due to COVID-19 may increase morbidity and mortality of Head & Neck Cancer (HNC) – resources to assist diagnosis and appropriate referral”**

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The Mouth Head & Neck Cancer Awareness Ireland Group (MHNCAI) would like to highlight the potential for diagnostic delay for patients presenting with symptoms of Head and Neck Cancer (HNC) during this pandemic. While the number of cases in females and younger people has increased in the past decade, this cancer is still most prevalent in older people (over 63 years; M:F = 2:1) particularly, but not exclusively, those with a history of smoking/alcohol use. Unfortunately, HNC patients tend to be less pro-active in seeking help, with two-thirds presenting with advanced disease (66% Stage III/IV) in pre-Covid times [1].

Recent reports suggest that many patients are slow to seek medical help during the Covid-19 pandemic due to fear of contracting the virus or belief that services are unavailable. A decrease of up to 80% has been reported even in cardiac and stroke admissions at some Irish centres [2]. Recent studies in Lancet Oncology predict a “10% increase in cancer related deaths in the next 5 years from breast, lung, colorectum, oesophagus, lung, bladder, pancreas, stomach, laryngeal and oropharyngeal cancer due to delays in care - referrals and screenings” or late presentation during Covid. “Delays to treatment of 2-6 months will lead to a substantial proportion of patients with early-stage tumours progressing from curable to incurable disease” [3,4]. Even a 4-week treatment delay is associated with significantly increased mortality and immense morbidity across 7 cancer types including HNC [5]. This highlights the need to minimize the time from symptom onset to cancer diagnosis and treatment initiation.

Over the past year all Health Care Professionals and hospitals have come under immense pressure to provide adequate medical care in the face of a pandemic while dealing with Covid-related cases/queries, changes to practice and subsequent appointment back-logs. Many clinicians adapted to the crisis by moving a proportion of their face-to-face consultations to digital/ telephone consultations. However, in the absence of a physical examination, clinicians are dependent upon the accuracy of patient-reported symptoms. Miscommunication may lead to misdiagnosis resulting in poor patient outcomes and increased liability risks. Clear diagnostic criteria are needed so that appropriate patients can be prioritized at a time when hospital and primary care service levels continue to be lower than pre-pandemic.

The 700 patients that present with HNC each year in Ireland, can prove diagnostically challenging as the symptom burden may be relatively low in the early stages and presenting signs may mimic a number of benign conditions. The following resources provide free user-friendly evidence-based information to assist HCPs in the triage and management of suspected cases of HNC in these difficult times:

1. The [www.mouthcancer.ie](http://www.mouthcancer.ie) website, launched by MHNCAI on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020, as part of the 2020 awareness campaign, includes: information on signs, symptoms, risk factors, simple exam technique, lesions and patient stories.
2. HNC Referral Advice for Primary Care Toolkit developed by the NCCP to assist health care professionals, particularly Medical /Dental Practitioners and Pharmacists to recognise HNC requiring urgent referral for specialist investigation and decide on most appropriate referral pathway. Available to download from:  
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/5/cancer/profinfo/resources/head%20and%20neck%20cancer%20referral%20advice%20for%20primary%20care.pdf>
3. Head and Neck Cancer module freely available to all local CME tutors on the ICGP educational platform.

#### REFERENCES:

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[https://www.ncri.ie/sites/ncri/files/pubs/head%20and%20neck\\_trends\\_report13.pdf](https://www.ncri.ie/sites/ncri/files/pubs/head%20and%20neck_trends_report13.pdf)
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- [3] Maringe, C; Spicer, J; Morris, M, et al. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer deaths due to delays in diagnosis in England, UK: a national, population-based, modelling study. Lancet Oncology. Open Access Published: July 20, 2020 DOI:  
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- [5] Hanna TP, King WD, Thibodeau S, et al. (2020). Mortality due to cancer treatment delay: systematic review and meta-analysis. BMJ. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4087>.