

Julie's Ordeal with Oropharyngeal Cancer and Oral Mucositis

"I was diagnosed in 2013. Most throat cancers are caused by alcohol and tobacco, but mine was caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). The primary site was on my tonsils, on the back of my tongue and on the side of my throat. My treatment was 30 consecutive days of radiation therapy. This meant a 20 minute radiation session every day, plus weekly chemotherapy. Basically, when you have radiation, you cook from the inside out. The impact on the inside of my mouth was catastrophic.

I lost over 20 kilograms in six weeks. That is a common issue with oral cancers. I didn't get tube fed. I kept taking nutrition orally, but was on liquid food for a number of weeks. I was able to keep swallowing enough liquid food to stay alive, basically. The inside of my mouth became very burnt. Under your tongue there are little lines of flesh and they swelled up like great big fingers of swollen soft flesh. My mouth was traumatised. It was very sore inside, I had ulcers, flesh sloughed off. It took a good six months before my mouth was anything close to normal.

These days, I am much, much better, I am back working normally and I eat normally. I lost the capacity to sing, and I used to have quite a nice voice. It's not my old voice, but I can speak. I am an example of radiation and chemotherapy being absolutely worth the effort."