

# Support group works to raise awareness of head, neck cancer

According to the American Cancer Society, each year approximately 55,000 people will be diagnosed and nearly 13,000 will die from head and neck cancer.

When discovered early, most cancers in the head and neck (cancer of the lips, mouth, throat and voice box) can be cured. Some symptoms to look for may include ulcers that won't heal, throat pain not relieved in two to four weeks, difficulty with swallowing, especially associated with weight loss, persistent ear pain, change in your voice or persistent hoarseness, changes in the way your dentures fit, unexplained facial pain and lumps or masses in the neck.

The best way to prevent head and neck cancer is to stay away from tobacco products such as cigarettes, cigars, dips, snuff and chewing tobacco. In addition, avoid excessive alcohol consumption — more than two drinks per day.

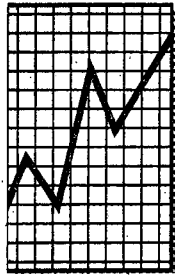
The University of Virginia Head and Neck Cancer Support Group meets the last Thursday of every month. While some might feel defeated by a cancer diagnosis, these patients have dedicated their lives to helping others, whether it is talking to children about the dangers of tobacco usage, or speaking candidly with individuals who are undergoing chemotherapy, radiation or surgery for head and neck cancer.

We are proud of our survivors, and hope you gain inspiration from some of their stories.

Larry Haywood developed cancer of the throat inhaling second-hand smoke when he was an entertainer in Las Vegas.

"This battle with cancer has

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given me a new perspective on life. People have taught me patience, humility and given me a sense of peace I've never had before. They also educated me about my disease and I hope that I can repay them.

"I feel compelled to seek out others who are like me and give them hope. Cancer is now 100 percent of my life. Winston Churchill once said 'If you're going through Hell, keep going.'

"Well, I have been there, made it, and now I must reach back and pull someone else through," Haywood said.

Haywood mentors head and neck cancer patients and youths and travels across the country spreading the word about the dangers of tobacco use. By the way, he is a power lifter, capable of dead lifting 700 pounds.

George Visich is a dual cancer survivor. He is operated on eight years ago for cancer of the larynx and last year for prostate cancer. George's mission is to spread the word about head and neck cancer in an effort to reduce its numbers in future generations.

He visits area elementary and middle schools and anywhere else he is asked.

"It means a lot when someone says 'What you said, what you've been through, caused me to quit smoking.' I don't want the kids to go through what I went through," Visich said.

He also speaks candidly with those who are about to undergo surgery or who have just had surgery to let them know what to expect.

"It's what you have to go through to get rid of the cancer that is murder," he says.

Visich is a living example that with a positive attitude and persistence, there is life after cancer.

Visich has a big sticker on the driver's side of his car that says "Cancer Sucks." So if you see him driving down the freeway in his red Chevy Lumina, be sure to beep your horn and wave.

The UVa department of otolaryngology celebrated Head and Neck Cancer Awareness week, April 7-11, and during that week there were health screenings, a reception for our head and neck cancer survivors, their families and supporters, and a luncheon to help raise funds for indigent patients to purchase liquid supplements.

For additional information about head and neck cancer, prevention and screenings, contact the UVa department of otolaryngology, head and neck surgery at 924-5700 or go to its web site, [www.health-system.virginia.edu / internet/ otolaryngology](http://www.health-system.virginia.edu/internet/otolaryngology),

*Lissa Nakhwa works with University of Virginia's department of otolaryngology. Vital Signs is sponsored by the University of Virginia Health System, Martha Jefferson Hospital, Thomas Jefferson Health District and Southern Health Services Inc.*