

Why Is Neck Palpation Important? Readers Share Their Stories

Difficult as it may be to believe, in May 2017, the United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommended against **neck palpation** as a method of thyroid cancer screening.

ThyCa strongly disagrees with this recommendation.

Read ThyCa's statement plus further readings here.

www.thyca.org/news/neckcheck051217

Below are comments our readers sent during spring and summer 2017.

Do you have comments on the topic of thyroid screening and neck palpation?

This is your opportunity to weigh in!

Join us and please comment on ThyCa's Facebook page, or e-mail your input directly to us at thyca@thyca.org.

Thank you!

I Am Healthy Today

My medical provider discovered my thyroid cancer by neck palpation. My only "symptom" was fatigue. This was easily explainable due to a medical issue our family was facing that led to lots of sleepless nights. If not for the neck palpation, I am quite certain it would not have been detected in a timely manner. Between the neck palpation and a great APRN who wanted to "make sure," I am healthy today! Side note: my cancer diagnosis prompted a further check on my mom. She was diagnosed with thyroid cancer a couple of months later.

At Age 67...

When I was age 67, the physician's assistant in my primary care physician's office found a nodule. She immediately got the doctor. After 2 years of watching and needle biopsy, my surgeon recommended removing it. It was cancerous. I had 2 operations, and here at 76 I am still cancer free.

5-Centimeter Tumor

I was diagnosed in 1998 with a 5 centimeter tumor. I had absolutely no symptoms, and, since the tumor was growing inward, no physical lump on my neck. I had a very bad ear infection and could not hear, so I went to an ENT. During the exam for my ear, he

palpated my neck. He said you have quite a mass in your neck and as soon as we get the ear squared away we are going to check that out.

Had he not palpated my neck and found the tumor, which had already spread to some lymph nodes, who knows what would have happened. Would the cancer have grown and wrapped around some of the vital structures in my neck or spread to the lungs or bones? Luckily I did not find out, because he palpated my neck, and things were taken care of before they went further.



ThyCa: Thyroid Cancer
Survivors' Association, Inc.
www.thyca.org

My 16-Year-Old Son

My 16-year-old son is a 6.5-year survivor of papillary thyroid cancer. The tumor was felt by his amazing pediatrician at his annual wellness check. After CT and needle biopsy, cancer was confirmed. He was completely asymptomatic, active, and feeling like a normal 10-year-old. Two weeks later, another CT scan performed by the operating ENT revealed that the mass was larger than thought, and was pressing into the side of his trachea. He was still asymptomatic, with no outward signs of illness at that time. Neck palpation is vital, and, when done by a skilled practitioner, potentially life-saving.

I Palpated My Own Neck

I found my tumor by palpating my own neck. It was like a Brazil nut, over 4 centimeters, and easy to feel in my thin neck. When I went to a surgeon, he couldn't feel it! I was astounded and insisted on an ultrasound. The tumor was attached to my trachea. I went to another surgeon who easily felt it and removed it. I say to feel your own body for lumps and bumps. Not all doctors can be 100%. Of course, it should still be part of a physical as well!

Medullary Thyroid Cancer

In December 2015, I visited my ENT physician with concerns about a minor hearing issue. During that office visit, my ENT chose to perform a full exam, including a "neck check." He discovered a thyroid nodule. I had no symptoms and had no idea that the nodule existed. Following an ultrasound and fine needle aspiration, I was diagnosed with medullary thyroid cancer, a rare and incurable form of cancer. After a full thyroidectomy and bilateral neck dissection, I was diagnosed as stage III. The difference between stage III and IV with medullary can be the difference between living and dying. Had my ENT not discovered the nodule by the neck check, I am confident that the nodule would not have been discovered until years later, likely at stage IV with metastasis to vital organs. My ENT and his decision to perform a simple neck check saved, or at minimum extended my life.

At My Annual Visit

I went to my internist for my annual visit in 1999. He palpated my neck (which no doctor had ever done before, that I can remember). He then asked me to drink some water while he palpated my neck again. He felt a nodule and sent me for more testing. The nodule turned out to be papillary cancer. After a total thyroidectomy, 100 millicuries of RAI, and, 18 years of thyroid hormone replacement, I have been free of thyroid cancer. If he hadn't done this simple neck palpation, it might not have been discovered for years and might have spread into the lymph nodes. It's hard to fathom why neck palpation is not favored by this task force.

Discovered My Nodule

Neck palpation was critical for me! I discovered my nodule myself, and continued to monitor it, as well as notifying my endocrinologist. Numerous ultrasounds and needle biopsies showed no cancer. The nodule continued to grow, and after a period of "watch and wait," I insisted on thyroidectomy and was diagnosed with papillary thyroid cancer. I was treated with radioactive iodine and have been cancer-free for 8 years!

“Keep That Guy!”

I'd like to echo what many are saying. I was changing insurance and my ob-gyn doctor palpated my neck and ran blood work and said all was fine. One month later my primary care doctor found my thyroid nodule by palpating my neck at a routine physical. My thyroid surgeon at a primary teaching hospital asked me numerous times who found it. His response was always, “Keep that guy!” It was direct front-center on my thyroid. KEEP all means of screening!

Young Adult Survivor

I just wanted to comment regarding the importance of neck palpation. In mid-January 2016, I went to my gynecologist for my annual appointment. At that time, she performed a neck palpation. Later that same month, I was in a car accident, and a thyroid nodule was found in a CT scan. Like another commenter said, neck palpation is not 100%; however, that does not mean it shouldn't be done. I'm a young adult thyroid cancer survivor, and I always urge everyone to check their necks now. There is no reason why palpation cannot be conducted in a routine office visit to potentially save a life. Thanks!

Wish I'd Had Neck Check a Year Before

I wish I'd had a Neck Check a year before I was diagnosed. It probably would not have spread as much.

Physician's Assistant Checked My Neck

What's the harm in palpating a neck?!! I was seeing a physician's assistant about something totally unrelated to my thyroid but because he was very thorough, he also checked my neck and found a lump, which turned out to be papillary thyroid cancer. I don't think I would have ever noticed it and even if I did, I would not have gone to the doctor about it. I would have thought it was nothing to worry about.

Not 100%

Neck palpation screening is not 100%. A neck ultrasound along with my GI doctor saved my life. You could not feel or see my nodules by touch or sight. They were there and cancerous. The doctor told me if I had waited and monitored any longer I probably wouldn't be here. My life and health matters. I need you to help me and others like me by being our voices.

Didn't Have Insurance

I didn't have insurance while my cancer was silently growing. When I finally got insurance, the cancer had spread up my neck and a huge cyst appeared. I moved to another state, told them about the cyst, and they focused on ridding me of the cancer. Unfortunately, it was caught late. Spread to lymph nodes, to lung. Two rounds of radioactive iodine. Now there is a highly suspicious bone lesion on my rib. I'm awaiting a PET scan. Scared and angry. This is the good cancer? I was 29 at diagnosis. Check thy neck!

Tonsils Removed

I went in to get my tonsils removed, and they found my thyroid tumor at my pre-op appointment. The doctors think I had had it for 5 years. I was 22 and diagnosed with stage T3N1B papillary thyroid cancer. It was wrapped around my jugular and had spread to my nodes. Neck checks are sooooo important!! I wish I had gotten one sooner.

My Husband

My husband was in for a pre-op physical for back surgery when the doctor did a neck exam and found a sizable lump. My husband is very lumpy all over his body. He's had many lumps removed. He never knew the lump was there. Even while shaving, he never noticed it and if he had, he would have attributed it to being a fatty tumor. The doctor referred him to ENT doctor. After an ultrasound it was suggested he get a Fine Needle Aspiration (FNA). But was told there was no hurry because the doctor was almost 100% sure it was not cancer.

My husband decided to take care of one thing at a time so he went ahead with his back surgery. Three months later he had the FNA. It was cancer.

If the doctor performing the pre-op physical had not done a neck palpitation, he would still be walking around with thyroid cancer. No one had ever checked his thyroid in 58 years. I actually just had my own first neck palpitation at 56 years of age. This should be a regular part of every doctor's visit whether a physical or being seen for a cold. It only took the doctor a few seconds.

From a Physician

As a soon to retire thyroid ENT surgeon who was diagnosed with thyroid cancer myself in 1989, I have been on both sides of the knife. I strongly urge self-neck exams, and I find about 5 patients a year who save their own lives. No one gets out of my office between the age of 18-60 without learning how to do a monthly self-neck and thyroid exam. Even if they come in for ear or nose complaints. Prophylactic ultrasound for no reason, NO. Prophylactic self-neck exams, YES.

— Scott Blanke, M.D.

Tall Cell Thyroid Cancer

In 2002 I went for a routine physical. My doctor palpated my neck, felt a nodule. Turned out to be tall cell thyroid cancer, an aggressive form of papillary thyroid cancer. I'm a firm believer in neck palpating. Many cancers will be missed if palpating is not done.

Neck Larger on Left Side

I could see that my neck was larger on my left side. My doctor did neck palpation, and referred me to a specialist. It was Stage Two follicular thyroid carcinoma. I also recently talked to my cousin who is a dental hygienist. They have been

trained to do this as well, along with the regular checks that they do.

Nurse-Midwife Discovered Nodule

I would just like to add my 2 cents regarding the USPSTF's recommendation against neck palpations. My thyroid nodule was discovered incidentally by my nurse-midwife practitioner during one of my first prenatal appointments. I was immediately (within the hour) sent to another office to get a Fine Needle Aspiration (FNA) performed. The results came back a few days later that it was thyroid cancer. I was devastated and shocked. I'd never had a single symptom, or anything to warn me that anything was wrong. I would not have been able to find that nodule if I had tried -- it was only due to the skillful fingers of that nurse midwife that she found it. I had my thyroidectomy 6 weeks after my daughter was born (talk about stressful timing!!!!), but fortunately all went well. I hope the USPSTF will take this information into account.

Sisters' Story

I was diagnosed "by accident" when a note was put in my chart that I had a goiter. I'd never had one, but the doc did an ultrasound to be sure. Found lumps, biopsy showed cancer, total thyroidectomy 2 years ago. I had no symptoms. My sister had an ultrasound 3 months later, found one mass too small to biopsy.

Fast forward to a follow-up 2 months ago: mass had doubled in size, and additional mass found. She went into surgery last week, and they found that her parathyroid glands on the left along with lymph nodes and a portion of her trachea also were cancerous. What was supposed to be a thyroidectomy turned out so much worse. She also had no symptoms.

I don't think screenings could hurt. My experience, and my sister's, have shown that if caught early, your prognosis is greatly improved. I would have hated to "wait and see" only to find that I would then have it spread out of control.

Stage III Follicular Thyroid Cancer

I agree with you ThyCa. I had no symptoms, no signs of my malignant stage 3 follicular cancer when my gynecologist kept insisting (at my annual exams for 3 years) to have my goiter checked out. I could not get an appointment with an endocrinologist (my insurance offered only 2) for over 7 months! My gynecologist authorized & sent me for the ultrasounds, which led to FNAs, which ultimately led to surgery, to confirm the malignancy. Had she not been so insistent, done the neck palpation, & authorized my ultrasounds, I may have been one of your increasing statistics.

Stage IVA

My stage IVa thyroid cancer could have been found much earlier by palpation. I had a persistent cough and difficulty swallowing for over a year and I was given a decongestant instead of a neck check. My involved lymph nodes were as big as grapes when a conscientious nurse practitioner asked me about them. I could have possibly avoided that left neck dissection, vocal cord damage, stunned parathyroid glands, left neck and shoulder nerve damage and numbness,

keloid scarring, so much more a neck check takes less than a minute!!

Thank You to Doctors

I'd been having weird thyroid results for about a year or more they were up and down so my new endocrinologist thought she might be feeling something. She sent me for an ultrasound. Then I needed a biopsy. I had 3 nodules, one so small that it usually wouldn't be biopsied until it got bigger.

The Doctor biopsied the bigger ones but kept coming back to the smaller one because it didn't look quite right. That was the one that came back with cancer, I had surgery and that one had broken the perimeters of the nodule. One of the others had self-contained cancer. My thyroid was removed. The cancer had not spread, but if we had waited a year I probably would be fighting more cancer in my body!

Both Doctors got a VERY BIG Thank you especially the Doc. doing the biopsy!!!! The cancer would not have been found if both of them hadn't done what they were supposed to do!

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