

A SAFE PLACE

SURVIVOR
GROUP
PROVIDES
SUPPORT FOR
HEAD AND
NECK CANCER
PATIENTS

Many head and neck cancer patients have unique challenges even after the cancer has been treated. Some have trouble speaking for the rest of their lives, while others can't speak at all or need an electronic voice box to communicate. Swallowing can become an ongoing challenge and so eating becomes a challenge, too. Many are scarred or even disfigured and their scars cannot be hidden.

"The psychosocial cost of this type of cancer is intense," explains Blair Franks, a throat cancer survivor and one of the first patients to join the head and neck patient support group that started at Keck Medicine of USC in 2005. "A lot of people hide away and become very introverted."

The support group was founded with one express purpose: to provide these patients a safe place to talk freely with other patients and with their doctors. And although all involved understood the importance of such a gathering, it was slow to take off.

"There were usually three of us and Dr. Sinha," recalls Franks of the early meetings of the group, which now calls itself HNC Support International.

Nine years later, the group counts dozens of members who spend part of one Saturday of every month learning from guest speakers about nutrition, exercise and ongoing problems, such as pain management. They also receive frequent updates on the latest research from one of the head and neck cancer specialists at

USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. Some of the most meaningful time is spent trading hugs and catching up with people who, over years of coming to meetings, are now old friends.

HNC Support International has not only grown in size, it has also broadened its mission. "We started as a basic support group and now we are an advocacy organization," explains Franks, who is CEO of HNC Support International.

The group advocates for awareness about head and neck cancers, communicating with head and neck cancer patients and other groups around the globe through its website and Facebook page.

"One of the goals is to teach other groups what we have learned and help them get on the same track," says Joe Lapides, president of HNC Support International and a head and neck cancer survivor.

On occasion, they even are able to help people in other countries who need better treatment. Most recently, the group has been invited to share its accomplishments at the 3rd Congress of the Conference European Otorhinolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery in Prague in June 2015.

New members to the group often come in a state of shock and fear about their future. The organizers say their hope is to give those new members hope and comfort. They want new members to see that survival is within reach, and that they may want to extend a hand to others who need their help.



Members of HNC Support International come together at a recent meeting at Keck Medicine of USC.

For more information, visit www.HNCSupport.org or www.Facebook.com/HNCSupport.