Total Laryngectomy

Surgery to completely remove your larynx or “voice box” is called a total laryngectomy (lar-in-jek-toe-mee). This surgery may be done to treat a cancer or an injury to your throat. The larynx is in your throat and sits at the top of your trachea (windpipe). Your vocal cords are in your larynx. Vocal cords create sound when you talk and sing. Your larynx also helps you swallow and breathe.

After surgery, the way you breathe will change. Your nose and mouth will no longer connect to your windpipe. A new opening called a stoma (a hole in your neck) will be made in the front of your neck during surgery. When you breathe, air will now pass in and out of your stoma. Since air no longer moves through your nose, your sense of smell may change. You should be able to eat and swallow as you did before your surgery.

Because your voice box was removed, you will learn how to talk in a new way. There are different electronic devices and ways to help you talk after surgery. Your doctor and a speech therapist will talk with you about the speaking method that is best for you.

How to Care for your Stoma

- Check your stoma each day. Keep the skin around your stoma clean and free from mucous and secretions. See the Patient Education handout Laryngectomy Stoma Care.

- Cover your stoma when you cough. Use a handkerchief or cloth to catch any mucous.

- Use a cool mist humidifier or cool mist vaporizer to add extra moisture to the air in your home. Extra moisture can help ease breathing, decrease stoma dryness and help reduce coughing.

- You may be asked to use a Heat and Moisture Exchange (HME) device. This helps to filter and add moisture to the air that passes through your stoma.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

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• Use stoma shields or covers to protect your stoma, especially when it is cold outside. This helps to keep dust, dirt, bugs and other objects out of your stoma. Stoma covers come in different styles and sizes. You may choose special cloth covers, foam filters or a lightweight scarf. Ask your speech therapist for information about these products.

• If you shave, do not get soap or lather in your stoma opening.

• **Keep water out of your stoma.** You need to protect and cover your stoma when bathing, showering or shaving. **Do Not Swim.**

**Stoma Equipment**

• You may be asked to use a stoma vent to help keep your stoma open and clean. A stoma vent is a clear plastic tube that you wear in your stoma. If you find it hard to put in your stoma vent, you need to wear it more often to keep your stoma from getting smaller. Your speech therapist, nurse or doctor will talk with you about how to use this vent if needed.

**Emergency and Safety Information**

• The only way for you to breathe is through the stoma in your neck. **If you need oxygen, it must be given through your stoma.**

• Make a plan to get help in case of an emergency. Talk to your local EMS (fire, ambulance and police) to let them know you may not be able to speak during an emergency and will need special rescue breathing.

• **Wear a Medic Alert bracelet that shows you are a “neck breather”**. You can also carry special emergency cards that show you need special care during an emergency.

• If talking is difficult, keep a pen and paper with you to write messages.

• Your sense of smell will change after a total laryngectomy. You may not be able to smell smoke from a fire, natural gas or spoiled foods. Check expiration dates on food. Check the smoke detectors in your home to make sure they work.