

SALIVARY GLANDS

There are six major saliva glands: the parotid glands, the submandibular glands and the sublingual glands. There are also hundreds of minor salivary glands in the mouth and throat, each one very small and are found in the mucous membranes.

It is possible to get infections of the saliva glands, most often the parotid glands. This is almost always treated with medications. However, sometimes dried secretions cause small stones that can block the duct. This may require a minor procedure to remove the obstruction.

When there is a growth, or tumor, surgery is typically performed to remove part of the gland. These often grow slowly and can get rather large before people become aware of them. Eighty percent of parotid tumors are benign, while 20% are cancers. However, even the benign tumors can grow and cause nerve damage and, if ignored, they also have the potential to turn to cancer. In the submandibular glands, 50% of the tumors are found to be cancers.

For a parotidectomy, the approach is done through an incision that is much like a face-lift incision. For most tumors only part of the gland is removed. The concern with this surgery is the facial nerve, which comes out near the ear and controls the muscles of the face. A nerve monitor is used to help identify and preserve the branches of this nerve. Depending on the size and location of the tumor, this can be done as an outpatient but sometimes may require an overnight stay in the hospital.

For removal of a submandibular gland, an incision is made in the neck underneath the jaw. The gland is removed and the incision closed. This is almost always done as an outpatient with no hospital stay.