Postoperative Complications in Head and Neck Cancer

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Head and neck cancer (HNC) encompasses several malignancies arising from different structures in the head and neck. The management of HNC is complex and requires multidisciplinary involvement with a range of treatment options that may lead to complications that have negative effects on patient outcomes. This article presents the role of surgery as primary treatment for HNC and describes postoperative complications, factors related to the development of complications, their clinical implications, and management. Comprehensive pre- and postoperative care is crucial in decreasing the incidence of complications and their impact on patient outcomes. 

Preventing surgical complications of the head and neck is, therefore, imperative for the delivery of high-quality care and improvement of patient outcomes. By knowing and taking into consideration factors associated with postoperative complications, recovery can be enhanced. Nursing interventions implemented to monitor and care for patients at risk for developing complications, promote prevention, and enhance prompt management of symptoms can decrease morbidity. The purpose of this article is to describe the role of surgery as primary treatment for HNC, describe postoperative complications and factors related to their development, and discuss their clinical implications and management.

Literature Review

A computerized search of the electronic databases (CINAHL®, PubMed, Ovid, and MEDLINE®) was performed using the timeframe 1970 to October 2011. The terms head and neck cancer, surgery, surgical complications, management, quality of life, and cost were entered as key words. Results were limited to English language, nonintervention descriptive studies that