Experts Refute Eddie Van Halen's Claim That Guitar Pick Caused His Throat Cancer

The guitarist used to hold metal picks in his mouth at shows, which he says put him at risk.

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UPDATE 10/6/2020: Eddie Van Halen has died of throat cancer.

Note: This article was originally published on 10/21/2019.

Last week, TMZ reported that musician Eddie Van Halen has been undergoing treatment for throat cancer. According to the tabloid, the guitarist for the rock band Van Halen claims his metal guitar pick caused his cancer—a claim that at least one doctor has publicly refuted, Insider reports.

Van Halen, who was diagnosed with mouth cancer in 2000 has already had a third of his tongue removed as part of his treatment. But sources told the tabloid that some of the cancer cells made their way down the guitarist's throat and that he's been receiving radiation in Germany for the past five years to keep the illness at bay.

According to TMZ, Van Halen believes that both cancers were caused by his old onstage habit of holding guitar picks in his mouth.

"I used metal picks—they're brass and copper—which I always held in my mouth, in the exact place where I got the tongue cancer," he told Billboard in 2015. "Plus, I basically live in a recording studio that's filled with electromagnetic energy. So that's one theory."

But doctors aren't buying it and have recently turned to the press to refute the claim.

For one thing, experts point out, Van Halen was a heavy smoker for years. The guitarist has also said he did a lot of drugs during his days on tour, which is also linked to an increased risk for throat, lung and mouth cancer. What's more, only certain types of metal have been proved harmful to human health—for example, mercury and cobalt. Copper and brass, the two metals in the guitarist's picks, have not been associated with an increased risk for cancer.

"Copper coils have been used as contraception in the human body for many years without

evidence of increased cancer risk," said Tom Micklewright, MD, medical officer at the British medical consultation service Push Doctor in a recent interview with Insider. "In contrast, numerous chemicals contained within cigarettes have been conclusively proven to significantly increase cancer risk, and the more likely cause of his throat cancer."

The doctor added that it was "disappointing" to see so many press outlets focusing on the metal angle of the story, rather than talking about the public health risks of smoking.

To learn more about head, neck and throat cancer risks, click here.

See also, "Experts Call For Smoking Cessation After Cancer Diagnosis."

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