

“Top Chef” Alum Shirley Chung Shares Tongue Cancer Diagnosis

Chef Shirley Chung announced that she has already completed six weeks of chemotherapy to treat her Stage IV tongue cancer.

August 7, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Top Chef contestant Shirley Chung recently [shared via social media](#) that she was diagnosed with Stage IV [tongue cancer](#).

On her Instagram, the “Top Chef” season 11 finalist and season 14 competitor shared a video of the moment she shaved her hair at her California restaurant [Ms Chi](#), which is temporarily closed while Chung focuses on her recovery.



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Shirley Chung (@chfshirleychung)

Last December, Chung, 47, “had a series of dental issues” that eventually led doctors to discover a “hidden tumor” under her tongue. A few days later, she was diagnosed with Stage IV tongue cancer, meaning it had spread to her lymph nodes.

Tongue cancer is a relatively rare type of [head and neck cancer](#), representing only about 1% of all new cancer cases, according to the [National Cancer Institute](#) (NCI). More than 65,000 people are diagnosed with head and neck cancer annually. About 80% of these are mouth and throat cancers. The five-year survival rate for tongue cancer is 70.4%.

“I was very calm when doctors delivered the news. As a chef, I’ve always [thrived] under pressure,” she wrote on Instagram.



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Ms Chi Cafe (@mschicafe)

[Treatment](#) for head and neck cancer depends on where the cancer is located and how advanced it is when it is detected, including how many tumors there are, how large they are and whether they have spread to nearby lymph nodes or other parts of the body.

Chung said she was offered two treatment options: remove her tongue or try a treatment similar to a “unicorn case” of another chef who received chemotherapy and radiation at the University of Chicago. Chung chose the latter.

“I chose to keep my tongue, I am a fighter, I am a chef, I can be that unicorn too,” she wrote.

She has since completed six weeks of [chemotherapy](#) with “many more to go.” She said her tumor is shrinking and that her speech is improving. She added that the experience has made her more vulnerable and led her to lean on her loved ones for [support](#).

“I am learning, I can be strong 98% of the time, it’s ok to be not ok. I have a tough long road to recovery in front of me. Your love and support will carry me through. Cheer me on, Shirley Chung 2.0 will be reborn in 2025!” she shared.

She received immense support in the comments section, including from celebrity chefs Alex Guarnaschelli and Tom Colicchio, who expressed their love and encouragement.

“Sending you so much love,” Guarnaschelli wrote. “Don’t be a chef at this time. Be a person who’s cool with getting support and love. You are loved all around you. Sending you positive vibes. Very brave of you to share with us.”

To learn more, click [#Head and Neck Cancer](#) or read Cancer Health’s [Basics on Head and Neck Cancer](#). It reads in part:

What is head and neck cancer?

Cancer develops when cells grow out of control. Head and neck cancer refers to a variety of different malignancies involving the mouth, throat, larynx (voice box), tonsils, salivary glands, jaw, nose and sinuses. Most head and neck cancer is squamous cell carcinoma that arises in mucous membranes lining the mouth, throat and nose.

A majority of head and neck cancers develop in the mouth and upper part of the throat, known as oral or oropharyngeal cancer. A growing proportion of oral cancers are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), which can be prevented with a vaccine. [Click here](#) for more information about oral cancer.

Cancers of the [thyroid gland](#), [esophagus](#), eye and [brain](#) are not classified as head and neck cancer.

What are the risk factors for head and neck cancer?

The risk factors for developing head and neck cancer depend on the specific malignancy. Overall, smoking or chewing tobacco and alcohol consumption are major risk factors. A large and growing proportion of mouth and throat cancers are caused by HPV, while those attributable to other causes are falling. Sexual contact, including oral sex, is a common way to contract HPV, but the virus can also be transmitted through nonsexual contact.

What are the symptoms of head and neck cancer?

Head and neck cancer can cause a variety of symptoms, depending on where it occurs and how advanced it is. Some malignancies don't cause symptoms until they've reached a more advanced stage, or they may cause nonspecific symptoms similar to those associated with other conditions. Symptoms may include:

- Lumps, bumps or swelling anywhere in the mouth, throat, face or neck;
- Unexplained pain, tenderness or numbness in the mouth, throat, face or neck;
- Unexplained bleeding;
- Blocked sinuses and chronic sinus infections;
- Difficulty swallowing, speaking or breathing;
- Swollen lymph nodes in the neck.