A glossectomy is surgery to remove all or part of the tongue. It is used to treat tongue cancer. A total glossectomy removes the entire tongue. A partial glossectomy removes only part of the tongue. The type of surgery you have depends on how deep the cancer has grown into the tongue tissue.

**What Happens During the Surgery?**
You will be under general anesthesia, which means you will be asleep during the surgery. Depending on how much of the tongue is removed, a skin graft or other tissue may be needed to rebuild the tongue. A common method takes a piece of tissue from the wrist area to reconstruct the area that was removed.

**What Can I Expect after Surgery?**
You will stay in the hospital for a few to several days after a tongue surgery. For the first day or two after surgery, you may receive oxygen through a face mask, through two small tubes placed in the nostrils, or through a tracheostomy tube. You may receive fluids through a small tube that goes from the nose to the stomach until you can eat and chew food again. You may have stitches in your mouth that dissolve in 2-8 weeks. Stitches on the outside of the neck will need to be removed in 7-10 days.

Doctors may use radiation treatment after tongue surgery to kill any remaining cancer cells. Speech therapy may help you regain the ability to swallow and speak.

**What Are the Possible Complications?**

**Pain.** After surgery, some pain is normal. While you are in the hospital, your health care team will do their best to control your pain. They will ask you often how much pain you are feeling on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being the worst pain you can imagine. This information helps your health care team decide what medicines will best relieve your pain.

When you go home, you will receive a prescription for the same kinds of pain pills you took in the hospital. Follow the directions for your medications. Tell your health care team if your pain gets worse.

**Infection.** Whenever you have surgery there is a risk of infection. Good hand washing is the best and easiest way to prevent infection. Wash your hands often, and make sure your caregivers and visitors do, too.

Watch for these signs of an infection:
- Increased pain, redness, or warmth where you had surgery
- Increased drainage from your surgery wound
- A fever higher than 101°F

If you notice any of these signs, tell your nurse or doctor right away.

**Swelling and bleeding.** To help reduce swelling and control bleeding from the surgery, you may have tubes placed around the surgical site to drain fluids. Your nurses will check the drained fluids often to make sure there is no infection and to watch for too much bleeding.

Swelling in the neck area can make it difficult to swallow. You will most likely meet with a speech/swallowing therapist during this time. It should improve within several days after surgery. Tell your health care team if you are not able to drink liquids or if you have questions about your diet.

**Blood clots.** Inactivity raises the risk that a blood clot will form in your legs. If a clot forms, it can move through the veins to your lungs. This can be deadly. To help prevent blood clots, your nurses will encourage you to get up and move around as much as you can. While you are in the hospital, your health care team may put foam boots on your legs. These boots inflate and deflate to keep the blood in your leg veins moving. Your doctor may also prescribe a blood thinner.
Pneumonia. Lying in bed too much keeps your lungs from expanding fully. This can raise the risk of getting pneumonia after surgery. To help prevent this, your nurses will ask you to start walking as soon after your surgery as it is safe. The nurses will also give you a device called an incentive spirometer to exercise your lungs in the hospital and after you go home. To use it, you breathe out as deeply as you can and breathe in through the mouthpiece of the device. It measures how much air you breathe in. After you go home, use the device about every two hours. This will help keep your lungs in good shape and prevent pneumonia.

If you have questions or concerns, talk with your health-care team. Also, visit or call the G. Mitchell Morris Cancer Learning Center (CLC), where you can talk with a cancer information specialist and find resources. The CLC is located on the sixth floor of Huntsman Cancer Institute and is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call 801-581-6365 or 1-888-424-2100 between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.