What Is the Thyroid?
The thyroid is a gland in the neck just below the voice box. It is shaped like a butterfly with two lobes connected in the center. The thyroid makes hormones that control many processes in the body, such as maintaining body temperature and healthy hair and skin.

What Is a Thyroidectomy?
Thyroidectomy is surgery to remove all or part of the thyroid gland. It is often part of the treatment for thyroid cancer. Your surgeon may also remove lymph nodes in the neck to see if the cancer has spread. For more information about lymph node removal, please see the Neck Dissection fact sheet.

After surgery you will need to take a medication to help your body replace hormones the thyroid made.

What Are the Possible Complications?

Pain. After any 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 about how much pain you are feeling on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being the worst pain you can imagine. This helps your health care team decide what medicines will best relieve your pain. They may put pain medicine directly into your veins or give you pills, depending on what works best.

When you go home, you will receive a prescription for the same kinds of pain pills you took in the hospital. Follow the pharmacy directions for your medications, slowly tapering the amount you take as your pain decreases. Notify your health care team if your pain does not decrease.

Infection. Whenever there is a break in your skin, there is also a risk of infection. Good hand washing is the best and easiest way to prevent infection from spreading. Wash or disinfect your hands often, and make sure your caregivers and visitors also do so.

Watch for these signs that an infection may be starting:

- Increased pain, redness, or warmth at the site of your 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. Swelling around the surgical site can cause pressure on the windpipe and make it difficult to breathe. To decrease the swelling, the surgeon will place tubes that drain fluids to the outside at the site of your surgery. At first, a suction device connected to the tubes will help remove the fluid. Your nurses will check the amount and character of the drained fluids often to make sure there is no infection.

Swelling can also make it difficult to swallow. 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.

Bleeding. The neck has many blood vessels, so bleeding is always a risk during neck surgery. The surgeon will place tubes in your neck to allow fluids that collect to drain away and to reduce the swelling after surgery. Your nurses will watch the amount and color of the drainage for excess bleeding. Some
blood is common immediately after surgery, but the drainage becomes more yellow as you heal.

**Pneumonia.** Lying in bed too much keeps your lungs from expanding fully. This can increase the risk of getting the lung infection called 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 to keep your lungs in good shape and prevent pneumonia.

**Blood clots.** Inactivity increases the risk that a blood clot will form in your legs. If a clot occurs, it can move through the veins to your lungs. This can be life threatening. 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 special foam boots on your legs. They inflate and deflate to keep the blood in your leg veins moving so it cannot clot. Your doctor may also prescribe a blood thinner to prevent clots from forming.