What Is the Larynx?
The larynx is part of the windpipe (or trachea) in the neck that carries air to the lungs. It sits at the top of the windpipe and often appears as a bulge in the front of the neck, creating the Adam’s apple.

The larynx is called the voice box because it contains vocal cords that create sound when you speak or sing. The larynx also helps hold the windpipe open so you can breathe, and it protects the lungs with a reflex that makes you cough when food or liquid touch it.

What Is a Laryngectomy?
Laryngectomy is surgery to remove all or part of the larynx. It is often part of the treatment for cancer of the larynx (also called laryngeal cancer). Your surgeon may also remove lymph nodes in the neck. For more information about lymph node removal, please see the Neck Dissection fact sheet.

Removal of the larynx may interfere with breathing, so your surgeon may need to make an opening in the front of your neck so air can move freely into your lungs. This opening is called a tracheostomy. It may be temporary or permanent, depending on the type of surgery you have.

What Happens after a Laryngectomy?
A laryngectomy may affect your ability to swallow. After surgery, you will get the nutrition and water you need through a feeding tube into your stomach or intestine. Before you go home, your health care team will tell you and your caregiver how to use the feeding tube if you still need it after discharge from the hospital.

Depending on the type of surgery you have, normal speech may no longer be possible. You may need to use a mechanical voice box or prosthetic valve for speech and receive speech therapy after surgery.

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 feel 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 an incision 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 breathing difficult. 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 always presents 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.

**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 blood thinners that prevent blood clots from forming.

**Saliva leak into the neck.** After a laryngectomy, your doctors must reconstruct your throat to allow swallowing. If this does not heal correctly, saliva can leak into the neck and create a wound or opening in the skin of the neck. If this occurs, your health care team may need to apply wound care for this to heal. Some patients may need additional surgery.