CONDITION

Lymphadenitis

Lymphadenitis is inflammation of one or more lymph nodes, usually caused by an infection.

WHAT IT IS
Inflammation of one or more lymph nodes

BODY SYSTEM
Immune and lymphatic systems

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Tender swollen nodes, pain, redness, fever

WHAT CAUSES IT
Usually infection; occasionally inflammatory conditions

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Examination; ultrasound, culture, or biopsy when needed

MAIN TREATMENT
Cause-specific medicines and abscess drainage

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - most infection-related cases fully resolve

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - breathing trouble, swallowing trouble, or severe illness

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Most acute cases resolve; persistent causes need targeted care

Overview

Lymphadenitis means inflammation of a lymph node. Lymph nodes are small, bean-shaped structures that help the immune system filter lymph fluid and respond to germs. They are found throughout the body, including in the neck, armpits and groin.

An inflamed node usually becomes enlarged and tender. The skin over it may feel warm or look red. One node may be affected, or several nearby nodes may become inflamed together.

Lymphadenitis is not quite the same as lymphadenopathy, which simply means enlarged lymph nodes. Nodes can enlarge without being inflamed. Lymphadenitis usually suggests an infection in the node itself or in a nearby part of the body.

Many cases improve once the infection clears or is treated. Some need antibiotics or drainage of a pocket of pus called an abscess. Persistent or unusual swelling needs further assessment

because several different conditions can affect lymph nodes.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the cause and which nodes are involved. Common features include:

Neck lymphadenitis may occur with a sore throat, dental infection, ear pain or cold symptoms. Inflamed nodes in the armpit or groin may be linked to an infected cut, bite or skin problem on the nearby arm or leg.

An abscess may cause increasing pain and a soft or fluid-filled feeling within the swelling. Some long-lasting infections cause nodes that enlarge slowly and are not very painful.

A node can remain noticeable for a while after other symptoms have improved. However, a node that continues to grow, feels hard or fixed, or is accompanied by unexplained weight loss or drenching night sweats should be checked.

- One or more swollen, tender lymph nodes
- Pain when touching the node or moving the nearby body part
- Warmth, redness or swelling of the overlying skin
- Fever, tiredness or feeling generally unwell

Causes and risk factors

Infection is the most common cause of lymphadenitis. Germs may reach a node from nearby tissue or, less often, through the bloodstream.

Viruses that cause colds, flu-like illnesses or glandular fever can produce swollen or inflamed nodes, often on both sides of the neck. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline do not treat viral infections.

Bacterial lymphadenitis is often caused by bacteria that normally live on the skin or in the throat, including Staphylococcus aureus and group A Streptococcus . It may follow tonsillitis, a dental infection, an infected wound or a skin infection.

Other infections can produce particular patterns. Cat-scratch disease, caused by Bartonella henselae , may cause a swollen node near the site of a cat scratch or bite. Tuberculosis and nontuberculous mycobacteria can cause slowly enlarging nodes. These causes require specific testing and treatment.

Risk may be higher when you have:

Inflammatory and immune system conditions can also enlarge lymph nodes. Cancer is an important but less common explanation for persistent lymph node enlargement. An enlarged node is not automatically lymphadenitis, so ongoing swelling may need tests to identify what is causing it.

- A recent throat, ear, dental or skin infection
- A cut, animal scratch or bite near the affected area
- A condition or medicine that weakens the immune system
- Recent exposure to tuberculosis
- Travel or environmental exposure linked to particular infections

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling began, whether it is painful and whether you have had fever, infections, injuries, animal contact, travel or new medicines.

During an examination, they may check the node's size, tenderness, movement and texture. They will also look for a nearby source, such as an infected tooth, sore throat, skin wound or rash. Other groups of lymph nodes may be examined.

There is no single test needed for every case. A typical short-lived infection may be diagnosed from the symptoms and examination alone. If the cause is uncertain or the swelling is severe or persistent, tests may include:

A biopsy is more likely to be considered when a node does not settle, has unusual features, or when examination and initial tests have not explained it.

- Blood tests for infection, inflammation or specific illnesses
- Ultrasound to look at the node and check for an abscess
- A sample of pus or fluid for laboratory culture
- Tests for infections such as glandular fever, cat-scratch disease or tuberculosis
- A needle sample or biopsy, which removes cells or tissue for examination

Treatment and management

Treatment is based on the cause. Not every swollen or tender node needs antibiotics.

Viral lymphadenitis usually improves as the viral illness passes. Rest, fluids and suitable

non-prescription pain relief may help with discomfort. A pharmacist or healthcare professional can help you choose a pain medicine that is safe for you.

Suspected bacterial lymphadenitis may be treated with antibiotics. The choice and length of treatment are based on the likely bacteria, the infection site, test results and your general health. Finish an antibiotic course as directed rather than saving tablets for later.

If an abscess has formed, antibiotics alone may not be enough. A healthcare professional may need to drain the pus using a needle or a small cut. Fluid can then be tested to identify the germ.

Infections such as tuberculosis, nontuberculous mycobacterial infection and cat-scratch disease need their own assessment and management. Treatment may involve specialist care, longer courses of medicine or, in selected cases, surgery.

Treating the nearby source is also important. This might mean care for an infected wound, dental treatment or management of a throat or skin infection.

Do not squeeze, puncture or repeatedly press the node. This can increase pain and may spread infection. A warm compress may feel soothing, but it does not replace assessment when symptoms are worsening.

Complications

Most uncomplicated cases settle without lasting problems. Possible complications include:

Complications are more likely when a bacterial infection is severe, treatment is delayed, or the immune system is weakened. Prompt review is important if pain, redness, swelling or fever is getting worse.

- An abscess inside or around the lymph node
- Infection spreading into nearby skin or deeper tissues
- Infection entering the bloodstream and causing serious illness
- Persistent swelling, scarring or drainage through the skin

Prevention

Lymphadenitis cannot always be prevented. It is often part of the immune system's response to an infection.

You may lower the risk of some causes by cleaning cuts and animal scratches promptly, caring

for your teeth and gums, and seeking treatment for worsening skin or dental infections. Avoid sharing antibiotics or using leftover antibiotics.

Regular handwashing can reduce the spread of some respiratory viruses. If you have had close contact with tuberculosis or develop symptoms after a cat bite or scratch, tell a healthcare professional so that the right testing can be considered.

Lymphadenitis itself is not inherited.

Living with it and what to expect

Acute lymphadenitis caused by a common infection often improves over days to a few weeks. Pain, fever and redness may settle before the node returns to its usual size. A small node can remain noticeable for several weeks while inflammation fades.

If antibiotics are prescribed, worsening symptoms or a lack of improvement may mean the diagnosis or treatment needs to be reviewed. An abscess may need drainage even when antibiotics have already been started.

Long-lasting infections can cause swelling for months and may require extended treatment or specialist follow-up. The expected course is linked to the underlying cause rather than the size of the node alone.

Once an uncomplicated infection has resolved, most people return to their usual activities without lasting restrictions. Repeated lymphadenitis may point to recurring skin, dental, throat or immune system problems that need separate assessment.

Routine follow-up is appropriate when a node is improving but remains enlarged, or when a clinician has asked to recheck it. Make an earlier appointment if it is growing, new nodes appear, or other symptoms develop.

When to get medical help

Arrange a medical appointment if a swollen node is painful, red or warm, especially if you also have fever. You should also seek assessment if the node:

Seek urgent same-day care for rapidly increasing swelling, spreading redness, severe pain, pus draining from the area, or a high fever with worsening illness.

Call emergency services if swelling in the neck is making it difficult to breathe or swallow, or if there are signs of severe infection such as confusion, faintness, blue or mottled skin, or extreme difficulty staying awake.

- Is getting larger or is not beginning to settle
- Feels hard, fixed in place or unusually large
- Keeps returning
- Is above or below the collarbone
- Occurs with persistent fever, drenching night sweats or unexplained weight loss
- Develops while your immune system is weakened

Common questions

Is lymphadenitis the same as swollen glands?

"Swollen glands" is a common name for enlarged lymph nodes. Lymphadenitis specifically means that a node is inflamed, often because of infection. Not every enlarged lymph node is inflamed.

How long does lymphadenitis last?

Symptoms from a short-term infection often improve over days or weeks. The node may remain slightly enlarged after pain and fever have gone. Slowly growing or persistent swelling should be assessed rather than watched indefinitely.

Is lymphadenitis contagious?

The inflamed node itself is not contagious. However, the infection that caused it may spread to other people. For example, some respiratory viruses and throat infections are contagious, while lymphadenitis caused by an infected wound generally is not.

Can I treat lymphadenitis at home?

Rest, fluids and suitable pain relief may help mild symptoms linked to a viral illness. Home care cannot tell whether a bacterial infection or abscess is present. Painful redness, fever, increasing swelling or symptoms that do not improve need medical assessment.

Does lymphadenitis mean I have cancer?

Usually not. Infection is a much more common cause of tender, inflamed lymph nodes. Cancer can cause lymph node enlargement, but those nodes are not always painful or inflamed. Persistent, hard, fixed or unexplained nodes need assessment to determine the cause.

Should I massage a swollen lymph node?

No. Frequent pressing or forceful massage can irritate the area and increase pain. Do not try to puncture or drain it yourself. If the swelling feels soft, becomes more painful or appears filled

with fluid, it may need professional drainage.

Sources

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