SYMPTOM

# Swollen glands

Swollen glands are enlarged lymph nodes that may feel like lumps under the skin.

**WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**
Tender or painless lumps under the skin

**WHERE IT IS FELT**
Neck, under jaw, armpits, or groin

**MOST COMMON CAUSES**
Colds, throat infections, nearby skin or dental infections

**WHEN IT IS URGENT**
Trouble swallowing or a neck swelling growing quickly

**USUALLY LASTS**
Days to weeks, depending on the cause

**SEE A DOCTOR IF**
Swelling persists, enlarges, or appears without a clear infection

## Overview

"Swollen glands" usually means enlarged lymph nodes. Lymph nodes are small structures that form part of your immune system. They help filter lymph, a clear fluid that carries infection-fighting cells around the body.

You have lymph nodes throughout your body. They are easiest to notice in your neck, under your jaw, behind your ears, in your armpits, and in your groin.

Lymph nodes often swell while your immune system is responding to an infection. The swelling may occur close to the affected area. For example, a throat infection can cause swollen nodes in the neck.

Not every lump is a lymph node. Salivary glands, thyroid swelling, cysts, hernias, and other conditions can also cause a lump. A medical examination can help identify where a swelling comes from.

## What it may feel or look like

A swollen lymph node may feel like a small lump beneath the skin. It can be tender when

touched, especially when caused by a recent infection. Some enlarged nodes are painless.

You may notice:

Other symptoms depend on the cause. A cold may bring a runny nose, cough, or sore throat. A dental infection may cause tooth pain or facial swelling. A skin infection may cause redness, warmth, or a wound near the enlarged node.

- One lump or several lumps close together
- Swelling on one or both sides of the body
- A soft, rubbery, or firm texture
- Pain when turning your head or moving a nearby limb
- Warmth or redness over the swelling

## Common causes

Infections are the most common reason for swollen lymph nodes. The swelling is part of the immune response rather than a disease by itself.

Common causes include:

Some viral illnesses can cause nodes to swell in several parts of the body. Lymph nodes may also enlarge temporarily near the site of a recent vaccination.

Less common causes include long-lasting infections, inflammatory conditions such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis, and reactions to certain medicines. Inflammatory conditions happen when the immune system mistakenly attacks or irritates the body's own tissues.

Blood disorders and cancers can also cause enlarged lymph nodes, but most swollen nodes are not caused by cancer. Features such as continued growth, a hard or fixed lump, or swelling without signs of infection need medical assessment. These features do not confirm a diagnosis on their own.

- Colds and other viral respiratory infections
- Throat or tonsil infections
- Ear infections
- Dental or gum infections
- Infected cuts, insect bites, or other skin infections

## When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if swelling in your neck, mouth, or tongue is making it difficult to breathe, or if you cannot swallow your saliva. Sudden swelling of the lips or tongue with breathing difficulty, faintness, or widespread hives may be a severe allergic reaction.

Seek same-day medical care if:

Book a routine appointment if the swelling lasts several weeks, continues to enlarge, keeps returning, or has no clear link to an infection. Arrange an assessment sooner if a lump feels hard or fixed in place, appears near the collarbone, or occurs in several areas.

You should also make an appointment if swollen nodes come with persistent fever, drenching night sweats, unexplained weight loss, ongoing itching, or unusual tiredness. These symptoms can have several causes and need proper assessment.

- A neck swelling is growing quickly
- Swallowing liquids is becoming difficult
- The swelling is very painful, red, or hot and you have a fever
- You feel seriously unwell or unusually drowsy
- You have a weakened immune system and develop new swollen nodes

## How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling began, whether it is changing, and whether you have had an infection, injury, vaccination, or new medicine. They may also ask about fever, pain, night sweats, weight changes, travel, or contact with animals.

During an examination, they may check the node's size, tenderness, texture, and movement. Your throat, ears, teeth, skin, abdomen, and other groups of lymph nodes may also be examined.

Tests are not always needed when the cause appears to be a short-term infection and the swelling is improving. If the cause is unclear or the node persists, tests may include blood tests or an ultrasound scan.

A chest X-ray or other imaging may sometimes be useful. In some cases, a sample is taken with a needle or by removing part or all of a node. This is called a biopsy, and it allows the tissue to be examined under a microscope.

## Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the swelling. Viral infections often improve without specific treatment. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline may be prescribed for certain bacterial infections, but they do not treat viruses.

If a medicine may be involved, do not stop it on your own. Ask the prescriber or a pharmacist for advice.

While you recover, you can:

Ask a pharmacist before using pain medicine if you are pregnant, take other medicines, have a long-term medical condition, or are unsure which product is suitable.

- Rest and drink enough fluids
- Apply a warm compress to a tender area
- Avoid repeatedly pressing, squeezing, or massaging the lump
- Use non-prescription pain relief only if it is safe for you and follow the label

## What to expect

Tender lymph nodes linked to a minor infection often begin to settle as the infection improves. The node itself may remain noticeable for several weeks, even after other symptoms have gone.

Lymph nodes can be easier to feel in children and people with less tissue under the skin. A small node that can be felt is not always abnormal.

Pay attention to the overall trend rather than checking it many times a day. If it is becoming smaller and less tender, that is generally reassuring. Arrange follow-up if it grows, becomes hard or fixed, or does not begin to settle.

## Common questions

Are swollen glands contagious?

The swollen nodes themselves are not contagious. However, the infection causing them may spread to other people, depending on the type of infection.

Does a painless node mean something serious?

Not necessarily. Both harmless and more serious conditions can cause painless swelling. A painless lump should be checked if it persists, enlarges, feels hard or fixed, or appears without

an obvious infection.

Should I massage a swollen lymph node?

Repeatedly pressing or massaging it may increase tenderness and irritation. It is better to leave it alone and monitor whether it is getting smaller.

Can stress cause swollen glands?

Stress alone does not usually enlarge lymph nodes. It can affect how you feel or how often you check your body, but a persistent lump still deserves assessment.

Can only one lymph node swell?

Yes. One node may enlarge when there is an infection or irritation nearby. Examples include a tooth infection, an infected cut, or a sore throat affecting one side.

## Sources

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