SYMPTOM

Swollen lymph nodes

Swollen lymph nodes are enlarged immune-system tissues that may form noticeable lumps

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Tender or painless lumps under the skin

WHERE IT IS FELT
Neck, underarms, groin, or other lymph node areas

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Colds, throat infections, skin infections

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Red, very painful swelling with fever

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, based on the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Swelling persists, grows, feels hard, or has no clear cause

Overview

Lymph nodes are small, bean-shaped parts of your immune system. They contain cells that help respond to infections and other changes in the body. Although people sometimes call them "glands," they do not make hormones or other fluids like true glands do.

Groups of lymph nodes are found throughout the body. Those in the neck, underarms, and groin are easiest to feel. Some lymph nodes are deep inside the chest or abdomen and cannot be felt through the skin.

A lymph node may swell when immune cells collect inside it. The medical term for enlarged lymph nodes is lymphadenopathy . One node, a group of nearby nodes, or nodes in several parts of the body may be affected.

Swollen lymph nodes are a symptom, not a diagnosis. Their location, texture, duration, and any other symptoms can help narrow down the cause.

What it may feel or look like

A swollen lymph node may feel like a small lump beneath the skin. It may be soft and movable, or it may feel firmer. Nodes reacting to a nearby infection are often tender, but not always.

The skin over the swelling usually looks normal. If a node or nearby tissue becomes infected, the area may become red, warm, painful, or increasingly swollen.

Common locations include:

Lymph nodes may swell on one side or both sides. Their size and tenderness alone cannot show what is causing the swelling.

- The sides or back of the neck and beneath the jaw
- Behind the ears or at the back of the head
- The underarms
- The groin

Common causes

Common causes: Viral infections are frequent triggers, including colds and other respiratory infections. Throat, ear, dental, and skin infections can also enlarge nearby nodes. For example, a throat infection may cause neck nodes to swell, while an infected cut on the leg may affect groin nodes.

Less common causes: Some longer-lasting infections can cause persistent or widespread swelling. Examples include glandular fever, also called infectious mononucleosis, and infections such as tuberculosis or HIV. Immune conditions, including lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, may affect several groups of nodes. Some medicines and recent vaccinations can also cause temporary swelling.

Potentially serious causes: Cancers such as lymphoma, leukaemia, or cancer that has spread from another area can enlarge lymph nodes. These causes are less common than infections. A hard or persistent lump needs medical assessment, but its feel cannot confirm or rule out cancer.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if neck swelling is making it hard to breathe. Get emergency help as well if you cannot swallow saliva, are drooling because swallowing is difficult, or the swelling is increasing rapidly and affecting your airway.

Seek same-day medical advice if a swollen area is red, hot, very painful, or rapidly enlarging, especially with a fever. These changes may indicate an infection that needs prompt treatment. You should also seek prompt advice if you feel very unwell or have a weakened immune system.

Book a routine appointment if the swelling:

These features do not identify a particular condition. They mean that checking the cause is important.

- Lasts for several weeks, keeps growing, or has no clear cause
- Feels hard, irregular, or fixed in place
- Is above or below the collarbone
- Appears in several unrelated areas
- Occurs with ongoing fever, drenching night sweats, or unexplained weight loss

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when you noticed the swelling, whether it is painful, and whether it has changed. They may ask about recent infections, dental problems, skin injuries, travel, animal contact, medicines, vaccinations, and other symptoms.

During an examination, they may check the node's location, size, tenderness, movement, and the skin above it. They may also examine nearby areas for infection and check for swollen nodes elsewhere.

Tests are not always needed when there is a clear short-term infection. If the cause is uncertain or the swelling persists, tests may include blood tests or imaging such as an ultrasound. Occasionally, a sample of cells or tissue is removed with a needle or minor procedure. This is called a biopsy and allows the tissue to be examined in a laboratory.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the swelling. Viral infections often improve without specific treatment. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline treat certain bacterial infections, but they do not work against viruses. An infected collection of fluid, called an abscess, may need to be drained.

While recovering, rest, drink enough fluids, and consider applying a warm compress to a tender

area. A non-prescription pain reliever may help if it is suitable for you; follow the label or ask a pharmacist for advice.

Avoid repeatedly squeezing or checking the node. Frequent pressing can irritate the area and make it harder to judge whether the swelling is settling.

Do not use leftover antibiotics or someone else's medicine. If an immune condition, medicine, or another illness is responsible, treatment will be tailored to that cause.

What to expect

Nodes that swell during an infection often become smaller as the infection clears. They may remain noticeable for several weeks afterward, even when you otherwise feel well.

In children and young adults, healthy nodes can sometimes be easier to feel, especially after frequent minor infections. Even so, a node that continues to enlarge or does not begin to settle should be assessed.

You may find it helpful to note the swelling's location and whether it is becoming smaller, stable, or larger. Arrange follow-up if it does not improve as expected or if new symptoms develop.

Common questions

Can I tell the cause by touching the node?

No. Tender, movable nodes often occur with infections, while persistent hard nodes need assessment. However, texture alone cannot provide a diagnosis.

Are swollen lymph nodes contagious?

The swelling itself is not contagious. An infection causing it, such as a cold or throat infection, may spread to other people.

Should I massage a swollen lymph node?

Gentle contact is unlikely to cause harm, but repeated pressing or vigorous massage can make it more tender. Leave it alone apart from occasional checks.

What if several areas are swollen?

Nodes in several unrelated areas can swell during some viral illnesses, immune conditions, or other health problems. Arrange an appointment, particularly if there is no obvious short-term infection or the swelling persists.

Sources

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