

Enlarged Lymph Nodes

Lymph nodes are found around the neck, underarms, groin, and many other areas of the body. They play an important role in the immune system. Lymph nodes often become swollen during minor infections, such as colds. Enlargement and swelling may also mean that the node itself is infected, or it may be a sign of another disease. An examination will help the doctor decide whether your child needs further evaluation to determine the cause of enlarged lymph nodes.

Why do lymph nodes become enlarged?

Lymph nodes are normally small structures containing cells that are part of the immune system. These cells help to control infections caused by bacteria and other germs. They also react to other foreign substances in our bodies. The lymph nodes and their cells can become enlarged for a number of reasons:

- *Infections* are by far the most common cause, for example, a simple cold.
 - When infection is in one part of the body, lymph node enlargement usually occurs in that area only; for example, with an abscess or “boil” (localized area of infection and pus, usually tender).
 - Other infections cause more widespread lymph node enlargement. Infectious mononucleosis (“mono”) causes lymph node enlargement in many areas, including the neck, armpits, and groin. Infections or abscesses may develop within an enlarged lymph node, causing redness and tenderness.
- Any foreign substance that produces inflammation or stimulates the immune system—even bug bites—can cause enlarged nodes.
- *Other causes* of enlarged lymph nodes are much less common:
 - Cancer cells that develop in or spread to the lymph nodes.
 - Diseases affecting the immune system.

What do they look like?

- Enlarged lymph nodes produce a round swelling underneath the skin. Generally, lymph nodes are considered enlarged if they are bigger than 1 centimeter (2/5 of an inch).

- Lymph nodes are found in many different areas of the body. Some common sites of enlarged nodes are:
 - In the neck area. This is very common when your child has a sore throat.
 - In the underarm area.
 - In the groin.
 - Many other locations are possible, including areas where nodes cannot be seen or felt (such as the head, chest, abdomen, pelvis, chest, and limbs).
- Your child may have enlargement of just one node, of several nodes in a particular area (regional), or of nodes all over the body (generalized).
- Nodes that are soft, not tender or red, and easy to move are often seen with simple viral infections (like a cold).
- When nodes are tender and the skin over them is red and warm, they may be infected (adenitis). This most often occurs in the neck.
- Lymph nodes “suspicious” for possible malignancy (cancer) or other serious conditions are often firm, “matted down,” and not easy to move. Nodes in certain locations, for example, just above the collarbone, may also prompt the doctor to check for more serious disease.

How are enlarged lymph nodes managed?

Examination is the important first step in determining the cause of enlarged lymph nodes.

- Most of the time, lymph nodes are enlarged because of viral infections, such as a cold. It may take a few months for the nodes to shrink back to their usual size.
- If the node itself is infected, your child will be treated with antibiotics. If an abscess is present, the doctor may need to perform a simple procedure to drain it.
- If the nodes appear abnormal, are in unusual locations, or don't get smaller with time, various tests are done to find the cause.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if enlarged lymph nodes don't start to reduce in size after a few weeks.