SYMPTOM

Neck lump

A neck lump is a new swelling or raised area anywhere on the neck.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A new bump that may be tender, firm, or painless

WHERE IT IS FELT
Front, side, or back of the neck

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Swollen lymph nodes, skin cysts, thyroid swelling

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Rapid swelling with fever, redness, or severe pain

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, depending on infection, cyst, or gland swelling

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It persists beyond two weeks, grows, or feels hard and fixed

Overview

A neck lump is a swelling that you can see or feel beneath the skin. It may come from the skin itself or from a structure deeper in the neck.

Many neck lumps are swollen lymph nodes. Lymph nodes are small parts of the immune system that can enlarge while your body responds to an infection. Other possible sources include the thyroid gland, saliva-making glands, cysts, or fatty tissue.

A lump's location, texture, and duration can offer clues, but they cannot confirm its cause. A painless lump is not automatically serious, and a painful lump is not always harmless. New or persistent lumps should be assessed based on the whole pattern of symptoms.

What it may feel or look like

A neck lump may be small and pea-sized or form a more noticeable swelling. You might find one lump or several. It may appear suddenly or grow slowly.

The lump may feel:

Swollen lymph nodes often appear along the sides of the neck, beneath the jaw, behind the

ears, or near the collarbone. Thyroid swelling is usually at the lower front of the neck and may move when you swallow. A skin cyst may have a small central opening and can become sore if inflamed.

Other symptoms matter. These may include a sore throat, cough, dental pain, fever, hoarse voice, trouble swallowing, weight change, night sweats, or unusual tiredness.

- Soft, rubbery, firm, or hard
- Tender when touched or completely painless
- Movable beneath the skin or fixed in one place
- Smooth and rounded or uneven in shape
- Warm or red if the area is inflamed

Common causes

Swollen lymph nodes are a common cause, particularly during or after a cold, throat infection, ear infection, or dental problem. They may be tender and can remain noticeable for a while after other symptoms improve.

Skin cysts are closed sacs beneath the skin. They often grow slowly and may feel smooth or firm. A cyst can become painful, red, or swollen if it becomes inflamed or infected.

Thyroid swelling or nodules can cause a lump at the lower front of the neck. A nodule is a small area of unusual growth within the thyroid. Most thyroid nodules are not cancerous, but they may need an examination and ultrasound.

Less common causes include an enlarged saliva-making gland, a fatty lump called a lipoma, or a cyst present since birth that becomes noticeable later. Some medicines and immune system conditions can also enlarge lymph nodes.

More serious causes include cancers of the mouth, throat, thyroid, lymphatic system, or other parts of the body. These are not the cause of every persistent lump, but prompt assessment is important, particularly when a lump is hard, fixed, growing, or accompanied by other concerning symptoms.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if swelling affects your breathing, you cannot swallow your saliva, or your tongue or throat is rapidly swelling. These symptoms need immediate help.

Seek same-day medical care if the lump:

Arrange a medical appointment if a lump lasts longer than about two weeks, is getting larger, or has no clear connection to a recent infection. Also book an appointment if it feels hard or fixed, returns after disappearing, or lies just above or below the collarbone.

Prompt assessment is also appropriate if you have ongoing hoarseness, one-sided ear pain without an ear problem, unexplained weight loss, drenching night sweats, coughing up blood, or a mouth ulcer that does not heal. These symptoms do not establish a diagnosis, but they should not be ignored.

Children often develop enlarged lymph nodes with infections. A child should still be assessed if a lump is growing, unusually large, hard, persistently painless, or accompanied by ongoing fever or poor general health.

- Is rapidly enlarging, very painful, red, or hot
- Occurs with fever or feeling significantly unwell
- Causes increasing difficulty swallowing
- Appears after a neck injury and continues to swell

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when you first noticed the lump, whether it has changed, and whether you recently had an infection, dental problem, injury, or other symptoms. They may also ask about smoking, alcohol use, medicines, and previous medical conditions.

The examination usually includes feeling the lump and nearby lymph nodes. The mouth, throat, ears, skin, thyroid, and saliva-making glands may also be checked.

Depending on what is found, tests may include blood tests or an ultrasound scan. Ultrasound uses sound waves to show whether a lump is solid or filled with fluid.

Some people need a CT or MRI scan for a more detailed view. A fine-needle aspiration may be recommended. This involves using a thin needle to remove cells or fluid for laboratory testing. It usually provides more useful information than trying to judge the lump by touch alone.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Lymph nodes related to a viral infection often become smaller without specific treatment. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline only help when a

bacterial infection is suspected; they do not treat viral infections or unexplained lumps.

An abscess, which is a pocket of infection, may need drainage as well as medicine. A troublesome cyst may be removed. Thyroid lumps are managed according to ultrasound findings, thyroid blood tests, and sometimes a needle sample. If cancer is found, treatment is planned by a specialist team.

While waiting for assessment, avoid squeezing, repeatedly pressing, or trying to drain the lump. This can irritate the area or spread infection. If it is tender, a warm compress may feel soothing. You may use a non-prescription pain reliever if it is normally safe for you, following the package directions.

Note when the lump appeared and whether it changes in size. This information can help during your appointment.

What to expect

A lump caused by a short-term infection often becomes less tender and gradually shrinks over days to weeks. A small lymph node may remain noticeable after you otherwise feel well.

Cysts, fatty lumps, and thyroid nodules may remain until they are treated or monitored. Further testing does not necessarily mean cancer is suspected; it is often needed because different neck lumps can feel similar.

If you have been advised to monitor a lump, seek another review if it grows, becomes hard or painful, or new symptoms develop. Do not rely on repeated self-checking instead of follow-up.

Common questions

Can stress cause a neck lump?

Stress does not usually create a physical lump. It can make you more aware of normal neck structures or muscle tightness, but a new lump should still be checked if it persists.

Does a painful lump mean an infection?

Pain and tenderness often occur with infection or inflammation, but they do not prove the cause. A professional assessment may be needed if pain is severe, worsening, or accompanied by fever.

Can a normal lymph node be felt?

Small lymph nodes can sometimes be felt, especially in children or after an infection. A node that enlarges, hardens, becomes fixed, or does not settle deserves review.

Should I keep measuring the lump?

A simple note about its approximate size and any changes can be useful. Avoid frequent pressing, which may make the area sore and make changes harder to judge.

Sources

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