Lymphadenopathy
(Swollen Lymph Glands)

Lymphadenopathy means "disease of the lymph glands." But the term is usually used to describe swollen or enlarged lymph glands, also called lymph nodes. These are the bean-shaped organs found in many locations including the neck, underarm, and groin. Lymph glands are part of the immune system, which fights infections in your body. Lymphadenopathy can occur in just one area of the body, such as the neck, or it can be generalized, with lymph node enlargement in several areas. The nodes found in the neck are the most common sites of lymphadenopathy.

CAUSES

When your immune system responds to germs (such as viruses or bacteria), infection-fighting cells and fluid build up. This causes the glands to grow in size. This is usually not something to worry about. Sometimes, the glands themselves can become infected and inflamed. This is called lymphadenitis.

Enlarged lymph nodes can be caused by many diseases:

- Bacterial disease, such as strep throat or a skin infection.
- Viral disease, such as a common cold.
- Other germs, such as lyme disease, tuberculosis, or sexually transmitted diseases.
- Cancers, such as lymphoma (cancer of the lymphatic system) or leukemia (cancer of the white blood cells).
- Inflammatory diseases such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis.
- Reactions to medications.

Many of the diseases above are rare, but important. This is why you should see your caregiver if you have lymphadenopathy.

SYMPTOMS

- Swollen, enlarged lumps in the neck, back of the head or other locations.
- Tenderness.
- Warmth or redness of the skin over the lymph nodes.
- Fever.

DIAGNOSIS

Enlarged lymph nodes are often near the source of infection. They can help healthcare providers diagnose your illness. For instance:

- Swollen lymph nodes around the jaw might be caused by an infection in the mouth.
- Enlarged glands in the neck often signal a throat infection.
- Lymph nodes that are swollen in more than one area often indicate an illness caused by a virus.

Your caregiver most likely will know what is causing your lymphadenopathy after listening to your history and examining you. Blood tests, x-rays or other tests may be needed. If the cause of the enlarged lymph node cannot be found, and it does not go away by itself, then a biopsy may be needed. Your caregiver will discuss this with you.

TREATMENT

Treatment for your enlarged lymph nodes will depend on the cause. Many times the nodes will shrink to normal size by themselves, with no treatment. Antibiotics or other medicines may be needed for infection. Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort or fever as directed by your caregiver.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

Swollen lymph glands usually return to normal when the underlying medical condition goes away. If they persist, contact your health-care provider. He/she might prescribe antibiotics or other treatments, depending on the diagnosis. Take any medications exactly as prescribed. Keep any follow-up appointments made to check on the condition of your enlarged nodes.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Swelling lasts for more than two weeks.
- You have symptoms such as weight loss, night sweats, fatigue or fever that does not go away.
- The lymph nodes are hard, seem fixed to the skin or are growing rapidly.
- Skin over the lymph nodes is red and inflamed. This could mean there is an infection.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Fluid starts leaking from the area of the enlarged lymph node.
- You develop a fever of 102º F (38.9º C) or greater.
- Severe pain develops (not necessarily at the site of a large lymph node).
- You develop chest pain or shortness of breath.
- You develop worsening abdominal pain.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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