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Patient information: Swollen neck nodes in children (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What are “nodes?” — Nodes, short for “lymph nodes,” are bean-shaped organs that are part of the body’s lymphatic system. The lymphatic system makes and stores cells that fight infections. People have groups of nodes all over their body, including in the neck, armpits, and groin area.

Normally, nodes are small. You might not be able to feel or see them under your child’s skin. But if your child’s nodes get big and swollen, you might be able to feel or see them under the skin. The terms doctors use for nodes that are big and swollen are “lymphadenopathy” or “lymphadenitis.”

Nodes can get swollen over a few days. Doctors call this “acute” lymphadenopathy or lymphadenitis. Nodes can also get swollen over weeks to months. Doctors call this “chronic” lymphadenopathy or lymphadenitis.

This article discusses swollen nodes in the neck ([figure 1](#)). But children can get swollen nodes in other parts of their body, too.

What causes swollen neck nodes in children? — Different conditions can cause swollen neck nodes in children. The 2 main causes are:

- Infections – Swollen neck nodes are usually caused by an infection. Different infections can cause swollen neck nodes. Some infections, such as the common cold, are caused by viruses. Other infections, such as some sore throats, are caused by bacteria.
- Conditions that are not infections – These can include diseases that affect certain tissues in the body (called “connective tissue diseases”) or cancer.

What are the symptoms of swollen neck nodes? — Swollen neck nodes are large lumps that you can see or feel on the front, sides, or back of your child’s neck. Swollen neck nodes are sometimes painful, especially when touched. Also, the skin around swollen neck nodes is sometimes red or warm.

Children can have other symptoms, too, depending on what’s causing the swollen neck nodes. For example, if the common cold is causing the swollen neck nodes, your child can have a runny nose, stuffy nose, or cough.

Should I call my child’s doctor or nurse? — Yes. If you see or feel a swollen neck node on your child, tell his or her doctor or nurse.

Because different conditions can cause swollen neck nodes, the doctor or nurse will probably want to examine your child to find the cause.

Will my child need tests? — Maybe. The doctor or nurse will ask about your child’s symptoms and do an exam. He or she might do tests to see what’s causing the swollen neck nodes. The tests will depend on how long the nodes have been swollen, if your child has swollen nodes in other parts of the body, and your child’s other symptoms.

The tests might include:

- Blood tests
- Lab tests – For example, the doctor or nurse can use a cotton swab to get a sample from the back of your child’s throat. Or, if the node has pus in it, he or she can use a needle to get a sample of pus from the node. These samples will be sent to a lab for tests.
- An imaging test, such as an ultrasound or CT scan – Imaging tests create pictures of the inside of the body.

- A biopsy – During a biopsy, the doctor will remove the node or a small sample of tissue from the node. Then another doctor will look at the sample under a microscope.
- A skin test for an infection called “tuberculosis” – This test involves getting a shot under the skin.

How are swollen neck nodes in children treated? — Treatment depends on what’s causing the swollen neck nodes and your child’s symptoms.

Most swollen neck nodes in children do not need treatment, because they are caused by the common cold. The nodes will get smaller when the cold gets better.

Swollen neck nodes that are caused by a bacterial infection usually need treatment with antibiotic medicines. Most children can take these medicines by mouth at home. But if your child has a severe infection, he or she might need treatment in the hospital. There, the doctor will give your child antibiotics into a vein through a tube called an “IV.”

If your child has a pus-filled neck node that doesn’t get better with antibiotics, the doctor might need to drain the pus.

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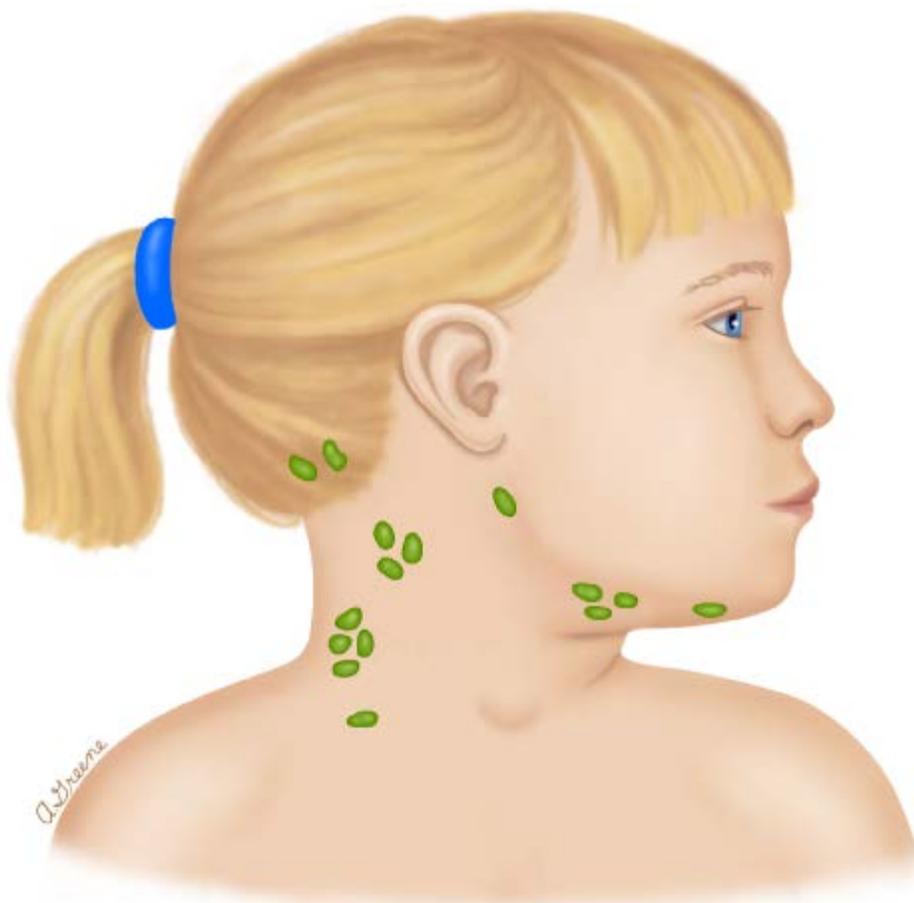
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GRAPHICS

Lymph nodes in a child's neck



Lymph nodes are pea-shaped organs. This drawing shows where the lymph nodes in a child's neck are.

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