



# Lymph Nodes - Swollen

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## Definition

- Increased size of a lymph node in the neck, armpit or groin
- Usually larger than the corresponding node on the other side of the body
- Normal nodes are usually less than ½ inch (12 mm) across (size of pea or baked bean)

## Causes

- Swollen nodes with a [viral infection](#) are usually ½ to 1 inch (12 -25 mm) across.
- [Swollen nodes](#) with a bacterial infection are usually over 1 inch (25 mm) across (size of a quarter).
- The cervical (neck) nodes are most commonly involved because of the many [respiratory infections](#) that occur during childhood.
- Elsewhere, localized nodes are usually reacting to local skin irritation or infection.

## Return to School

- Swollen lymph nodes alone are not contagious. If the swollen nodes are associated with a cold, sore throat or other infection, your child can return to school after the fever is gone and your child feels well enough to participate in normal activities.

## Care Advice

1. Reassurance for Normal Nodes: If you have discovered a pea-sized or bean-sized node (smaller than ½ inch or 12 mm), this is a normal lymph node. Don't look for lymph nodes, because you can always find some (especially in the neck and groin).
2. Reassurance for Swollen Nodes from a Viral Infection: Viral throat infections and colds can cause lymph nodes in the neck to double in size. Slight enlargement and mild tenderness means the lymph node is fighting the infection and doing a good job.
3. Fever or Pain Medicine: Give acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol) or ibuprofen as needed for fever above 102° F (39° C) or pain. Otherwise no treatment is needed.

4. **Avoid Squeezing:** Don't squeeze lymph nodes because it may keep them from shrinking back to normal size. Tell your child not to fidget with them.
5. **Contagiousness:** Swollen lymph nodes alone are not contagious. If the swollen nodes are associated with a cold, sore throat or other infection, your child can return to school after the fever is gone and your child feels well enough to participate in normal activities.
6. **Expected Course:** After the infection is gone, the nodes slowly return to normal size over 2 to 4 weeks. However, they won't ever completely disappear.

## **When To Call**

### *Call Your Doctor Now (night or day) If*

- Your child looks or acts very sick
- Node in the neck causes difficulty with breathing, swallowing or drinking
- Fever over 104° F (40° C) and not improved 2 hours after fever medicine
- Overlying skin is red
- Rapid increase in size of node over several hours

### *Call Your Doctor Within 24 Hours (between 8 am and 4 pm) If*

- You think your child needs to be seen
- 1 or more inches (2.5 cm or more) in size by measurement
- Very tender to the touch
- Interferes with moving the neck, arm or leg
- Fever present for more than 3 days

### *Call Your Doctor During Weekday Office Hours If*

- You have other questions or concerns
- In the neck and also has a sore throat
- Large nodes at multiple locations
- Cause of the swollen node is unknown
- Age under 1 month old
- Large node persists over 1 month

*Adapted from The American Academy of Pediatrics (2011) at [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)*