

Symptoms of lymphoma

This page describes the most common symptoms of lymphoma, why they happen, and what to do if you have them. We also have a page about [coping with symptoms](#) if you have been diagnosed with lymphoma.

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Common symptoms of lymphoma

There are over 60 [types of lymphoma](#), broadly divided into [Hodgkin lymphoma](#) and [non-Hodgkin lymphoma](#). These lymphomas can start almost anywhere in the body and can have many different symptoms. The exact symptoms they cause depend on the type of lymphoma and where it is in the body.

Most of the symptoms of lymphoma can also be symptoms of many other illnesses. These are often mild illnesses such as infections but they can sometimes be more serious conditions.

Because the symptoms of lymphoma are very general, it can sometimes be difficult to diagnose.

The most common symptoms of lymphoma are:



Swollen lymph nodes

The most common sign of lymphoma is a lump or lumps, usually in the neck, armpit or groin. They are usually painless. These lumps are **swollen lymph nodes**. Lots of things that aren't lymphoma can cause lumps – and not all lymphomas cause obvious lumps.



Fatigue

Fatigue means being exhausted for no obvious reason or feeling washed out after doing very little. It is not the same as normal tiredness; fatigue is overwhelming and doesn't usually feel better after sleep or rest. Fatigue can be caused by many different things. Lymphoma is just one of them.



Unexplained weight loss

Unexplained **weight loss** means losing a lot of weight quite quickly when you're not trying to. It can be a symptom of lymphoma – but it can be caused by other things, too.

Sweats



Lymphoma can cause **night sweats** that make your nightclothes and bed sheets soaking wet. The night sweats are often described as ‘drenching’. They can happen with any type of lymphoma and can also happen during the day. Night sweats can also have causes other than lymphoma.

Itching



Itching (‘pruritus’) without a rash can be a symptom of lymphoma but it can have many other causes. It can be very troublesome, particularly in hot weather.

Lymphoma affects everybody differently. For example:

- You might have lots of symptoms, only a few symptoms, or no symptoms at all. (Sometimes lymphoma is discovered during tests for something else.)
- You might have symptoms in one area (local symptoms) or symptoms that affect your whole body (systemic symptoms).
- You might feel well or you might become very unwell quickly.

Local symptoms and systemic symptoms

Some symptoms of lymphoma affect the area in and around the lymphoma itself. These are called ‘local symptoms’. The most common local symptom is a swollen lymph node or nodes. Other local symptoms are caused by swollen nodes pressing on nearby tissues. The symptoms you experience depend on where the swollen lymph nodes are.

You might have:

- chest symptoms, such as cough or breathlessness
- abdominal (tummy) symptoms, such as a sense of fullness
- skin symptoms, such as a rash or itching
- pain (although this is uncommon)
- brain and nerve symptoms (again, these are uncommon), such as fits (seizures), dizziness or weakness in an arm or leg
- swelling in your arms or legs
- anaemia (low numbers of red blood cells), which can make you feel tired.

Some symptoms of lymphoma affect your whole body. These are called 'systemic symptoms'. They are caused by the chemicals produced by the lymphoma itself and your body's reaction to the lymphoma. Systemic symptoms include:

- weight loss
- fever
- night sweats
- fatigue
- itching
- frequent infections.

Around 1 in 4 people with **Hodgkin lymphoma** and 1 in 3 people with **high-grade non-Hodgkin lymphoma** may have systemic symptoms. Systemic symptoms are less common in people with **low-grade non-Hodgkin lymphoma**.

What should I do if I have symptoms of lymphoma?

Most of the symptoms of lymphoma can occur in other, more common illnesses as well. Having one or more of these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you have lymphoma.

If you think you might have lymphoma, or you are worried about any aspect of your health, visit your GP.

You can also find helpful information and advice about your health on **NHS Choices** or **Patient.Info**.

If you have a diagnosis of lymphoma and you're finding it difficult to manage your symptoms, we have some general guidance for [coping with some of the common symptoms of lymphoma](#). Speak to your doctor for advice about managing your individual symptoms.

B symptoms

You may hear the term 'B symptoms', especially when your lymphoma is being staged. **Staging** is the process of working out how many different parts of your body are affected by lymphoma. The following symptoms are referred to as B symptoms:

- unexplained weight loss
- night sweats
- fever.

Doctors will take into account whether you have any B symptoms when they plan your [treatment](#).

Swollen lymph nodes

Lymph nodes help to fight infection. They can become swollen for lots of reasons, even when they're working as they should.

A swollen lymph node or nodes is the most common symptom of lymphoma – but lymphoma is **not** the most common cause of swollen lymph nodes. Most people who have swollen lymph nodes do not have lymphoma. More common causes of swollen lymph nodes include:

- infections, such as coughs, colds, ear and throat infections
- illnesses that affect the [immune system](#), such as rheumatoid arthritis
- severe skin diseases such as eczema or psoriasis
- some medicines.

Swollen lymph nodes caused by infections are usually sensitive or painful to the touch. The swelling normally goes down within 2 or 3 weeks.

Swollen lymph nodes caused by lymphoma:

- are most commonly found in the neck, armpit or groin
- are usually smooth and round
- tend to be mobile (they move out of the way when you press on them)
- have a 'rubbery' texture

- are usually painless – although they can sometimes ache or cause pain in nearby areas (for example, if they're pressing on a nerve)
 - rarely, can become painful a few minutes after drinking alcohol (this affects up to 5 in 100 people with **Hodgkin lymphoma** and is probably due to blood vessels in the lymph node widening in response to alcohol).
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Having swollen lymph nodes does not necessarily mean you have lymphoma. If you notice a lump that doesn't go away within 2 to 3 weeks, or you find that a lump is getting bigger, see your doctor.

Lymph nodes in the neck, armpit or groin are close to the surface of the skin and are easy to see and feel. Others, such as those deep inside the abdomen (stomach) or the chest, can't be felt from the outside. If these swell, they might cause pain if they press on internal tissues, or they might only be found on a **scan**.

Around 2 in 3 people with lymphoma have swollen lymph nodes that they can feel. It might be the only sign that anything is wrong.

You might have swollen lymph nodes:

- **in just one area of your body**, which can happen with any type of lymphoma
- **spread throughout your body** (known as 'generalised lymphadenopathy'), which is more common in **non-Hodgkin lymphoma** than **Hodgkin lymphoma**.

Swollen lymph nodes in lymphoma are caused by a build-up of cancerous cells in the lymph nodes. Sometimes the disease is active, making lots of cancerous cells, while at other times it quietens down and some of the cells die. This means the swollen lymph nodes can sometimes grow and shrink, especially in people with **low-grade non-Hodgkin lymphoma**.

Fatigue

Fatigue is overwhelming physical, emotional or mental exhaustion for no obvious reason. It isn't relieved by sleep or rest. People describe it as feeling drained of energy, or being so tired you can't do your normal activities. Sometimes even simple daily tasks, such as getting dressed, can feel too much.

Many conditions can make you feel fatigued, including anaemia (low red blood cell count), underactive thyroid, depression and anxiety, chronic fatigue syndrome and glandular fever. If you feel fatigued, it does not necessarily mean that you have lymphoma.

Exactly **why lymphoma causes fatigue** is not known. It is likely that there are several reasons for it.

If you are experiencing fatigue, speak to your doctor. We also have some **suggestions that may help you cope with fatigue.**

Unexplained weight loss

'Unexplained' weight loss means losing weight over a short period of time without trying to. The NHS advises that you see your GP if you lose more than 5% of your normal body weight over 6 to 12 months. For an average person, this means losing around half a stone (7lbs) or more. People with lymphoma might lose more than this: over 10% of their body weight within 6 months. For example, a person who usually weighs 11 stone (70kg) might lose 15lbs (7kg) or more.

Weight loss can happen in people with lymphoma because cancerous cells use up your energy resources. In addition, your body uses energy trying to get rid of the cancerous cells. Weight loss is more common with lymphomas that grow very quickly and put a sudden demand on your body.

As with many other symptoms, weight loss can happen for a lot of other reasons, such as stress, depression, diseases of the digestive tract, or overactive thyroid. Lymphoma is just one of the possible causes of unexplained weight loss.

Contact your doctor if you lose more than 5% of your body weight over 6 to 12 months without trying to.

Night sweats

If you have night sweats, it does not necessarily mean you have lymphoma. Night sweats can also be caused by other conditions, such as a viral infection, anxiety, menopause or some medicines.

Doctors don't know exactly why lymphoma causes night sweats. One possible reason is that they are your body's natural reaction to your temperature rising above a normal level (fever). Night sweats may also be a response to some of the chemicals produced by the lymphoma cells.

Lymphoma can cause night sweats that are severe enough to make your nightclothes and bed linen soaking wet. They are often described as 'drenching'. They can happen with any type of lymphoma. Although they are usually called night sweats, they can also sometimes happen during the day.

There are **things you can do that might help you to cope with night sweats**, but do also speak to your medical team for advice.

Contact your doctor if you have night sweats that regularly wake you up or if you also have other symptoms, such as fever or unexplained weight loss.

Itching

Itching (also known as 'pruritus') can be caused by many different conditions, including allergies, skin conditions such as eczema, skin infections or menopause. It is not usually serious. Although itching is common in people with lymphoma, having itchy skin does not necessarily mean you have lymphoma.

Itching affects around 1 in 3 people with **Hodgkin lymphoma** and 1 in 10 people with **non-Hodgkin lymphoma**. It can affect:

- areas of skin near lymph nodes that are affected by lymphoma
- patches of **skin lymphoma**
- the lower legs
- the whole body.

Itching in lymphoma is thought to be due to chemicals released by your immune system, as part of its reaction against the lymphoma cells. These chemicals irritate the nerves in your skin and make it itch.

Itching due to lymphoma can be severe. It may also cause a burning sensation. It is not usually associated with an obvious rash unless you have skin lymphoma.

Itching can be very difficult to tolerate, especially in hot weather. It is usually worse at night in bed. If you have a diagnosis of lymphoma and you are struggling to cope with itching, there are some **things you could try that might help**. Also speak to your medical team for advice.

Contact your GP if you have itching that affects your whole body or lasts for more than 2 weeks.

Fever

Fever is a rise in your body temperature above the normal level. It is almost always caused by an infection, but there are a few other much less common causes, including lymphoma.

Lymphoma causes fevers because the lymphoma cells produce chemicals that raise your body temperature. Lymphoma usually causes mild fevers – a body temperature over 38°C or 100.4°F. These are described as ‘low-grade’ fevers. They usually come and go.

Contact your doctor if you have a fever without an obvious infection that lasts for 2 weeks or more.

Difficulty getting over infections

Having lymphoma can mean that your **immune system doesn’t work as well as it should**.

Normally, **white blood cells** fight infections. If you have lymphoma, cancerous white blood cells (that make up the lymphoma) are produced instead of the healthy, ‘good’ white blood cells. This can make you pick up infections more easily. The infections could be more severe or last for longer than they would normally.

Infections often cause a high temperature and make you feel hot and shivery. Other symptoms depend on where in your body you have the infection – for example, you might have an earache, a cough, a sore throat, pain when you have a wee, or sickness and diarrhoea.

See your GP if you’re worried that you’re not getting better after a minor infection.

Chest symptoms

Any type of lymphoma can cause swollen lymph nodes in the chest but they are especially common in **Hodgkin lymphoma** and some types of **high-grade non-Hodgkin lymphoma** (where the cells appear to be dividing quickly). Around 1 in 2 people with Hodgkin lymphoma have swollen lymph nodes in their chest.

Swollen lymph nodes in the chest can press on your airways, lungs, or blood vessels. They can also make fluid collect around your lungs.

This can cause:

- a dry cough
- shortness of breath
- noisy breathing
- pain behind the breastbone
- a feeling of pressure in the chest.

These symptoms may be worse when you lie down.

It is important to remember that all these symptoms can happen with many other illnesses, especially lung diseases. Having these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you have lymphoma.

Visit your GP if you've had a cough lasting more than 3 weeks or shortness of breath lasting more than 4 weeks.

Abdominal (tummy) symptoms

Lymphoma can develop in lymph nodes in the abdomen (tummy) or lymphatic tissue in your liver or **spleen**. It can also develop outside your lymphatic system ('extranodal' lymphoma). The gut is the most common place for extranodal lymphoma to develop.

Symptoms of lymphoma in the tummy depend on what part of the tummy is involved. For example:

- If your spleen is very swollen, you might have pain behind your ribs on the left side, or you might feel bloated or full after eating only small amounts of food. You or your doctor might be able to feel the swollen spleen as a lump in the top left hand side of your tummy.

- If you have lymphoma affecting your liver, your tummy might become swollen, the whites of your eyes and your skin might develop a yellow tinge (jaundice), or you might notice a build-up of fluid in your abdomen. This can make you feel bloated.
- Lymphoma in the stomach can cause inflammation of the stomach lining (gastritis), which may cause pain, nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting.
- Lymphoma in the bowel can cause abdominal pain, diarrhoea or constipation.

See your GP if you have blood in your poo, diarrhoea for more than 7 days, green or yellow vomit, vomiting lasting more than 2 days, or if you are dehydrated and you are unable to keep liquids down.

See your GP urgently if your skin or the whites of your eyes look yellow.

Pain

Swollen lymph nodes themselves are not usually painful but lymphoma can press on the tissues around the nodes and cause pain. Where you feel the pain depends on where the lymphoma is.

Lymphoma in the bone itself is rare but when it does happen, it can cause pain in the affected bone. It is more common to have lymphoma in the **bone marrow** (the spongy part in the middle of some of our larger bones), but this doesn't usually cause pain.

If you are worried about any aspect of your health, visit your GP.

Skin symptoms

If you have **skin lymphoma**, you might get symptoms on your skin such as:

- flat red patches
- raised plaques with a scaly surface
- lumps.

Lymphoma in the skin can look a lot like other skin conditions, such as eczema or psoriasis. Skin lymphomas are usually low-grade lymphomas. Sometimes other parts of the body are also affected but for most people with skin lymphoma, it stays in the skin.

If you have a diagnosis of skin lymphoma and you are finding it hard to cope with your symptoms, there are some **things you could try that might help**. Also speak to your medical team for advice.

Contact your GP urgently if you have a rash that starts suddenly and spreads quickly, a rash that is all over your body, or a rash with other symptoms such as pain, fever or breathlessness.

Visit your GP if you have a rash that doesn't go away within a few days or that is interfering with your normal life.

Brain and nerve symptoms

Lymphoma that starts in or spreads to the brain or nervous system is very uncommon but can cause symptoms such as headaches, fits (seizures), memory problems, dizziness, sight problems, numbness, tingling or weakness in a limb. Many other conditions can also cause these symptoms, such as epilepsy, migraine or stroke.

Contact your GP if you have any of these symptoms.

Swelling in the arms or legs

Swollen lymph nodes can sometimes block the lymphatic vessels that run through the body. This stops fluid called **lymph** draining properly from the body's tissues. This fluid can build up, causing swelling and feelings of tightness, heaviness or soreness. This is called 'lymphoedema'. It usually affects an arm or a leg, although other areas of the body can be affected depending on where your lymphoma is. Other conditions, such as infection, injury, or some types of surgery, can also cause lymphoedema.

It is important to know that lymphoedema is very uncommon and usually gets better once treatment is started. If you are finding it hard to cope with, there are some things you can do that might help.

See your GP if you have any symptoms of lymphoedema.

Anaemia

Around 1 in 3 people with lymphoma have **anaemia** (low number of red blood cells). This can make you feel tired and breathless because your body has to work harder than usual to get enough oxygen. You might look pale and you may have heart palpitations.

Anaemia may be caused by **lymphoma in the bone marrow** or by bleeding due to lymphoma in the gut. If you have a swollen spleen, anaemia can also be caused by red blood cells collecting in the spleen or being destroyed in the spleen. Lots of other, less serious, conditions can also cause anaemia, such as heavy periods, pregnancy or stomach ulcers.

Contact your GP if you think you might be anaemic.

Seeing your GP

You might find it helpful to keep a note of your symptoms and how they're affecting you. You could have this with you when you speak to your GP so that you remember everything you want to discuss.

If your GP suspects lymphoma, you might be **referred for tests and scans**. If, at any time you feel a second opinion would be helpful, you are entitled to ask for one.

References

The full list of references is available on request. Please email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk or call 01296 619409 if you would like a copy.

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