

Swollen glands

Daddy: I have balls like peas in my neck!



Inflammation of the throat lymph node. Inflamación del nódulo linfático de la garganta. ID: 1117938110

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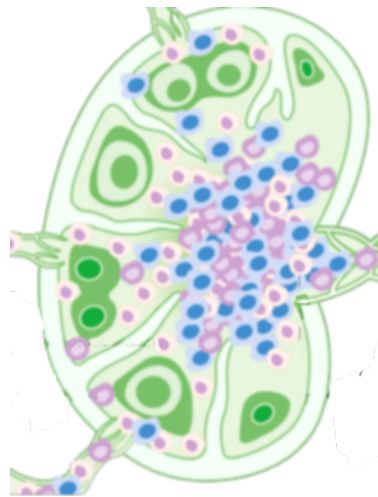
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When Lilly got up that morning to go to school, she noticed that something was bothering her neck. She'd had a bit of a cough and a sore throat for two days, but it hadn't stopped her from going to school and playing with her friends in the park, like every day. When she touched her neck, she noticed little balls on both sides of it. It was as if she had peas under her skin! Lilly ran to tell daddy, who touched her neck and said, "Don't worry, Lilly, they're just ganglions".

But what are ganglions? Lilly had never heard the word.

Ganglia are structures all over the body that are part of the immune system, which is responsible for producing defences against infection and other diseases. Inside them are some very important cells called lymphocytes. Lymphocytes act as policemen against intruders that want to enter our body, such as viruses or bacteria. When this happens, the lymphocytes alert the rest of the body's policemen to come and defend us at the site of the infection. So, although we can't normally see the lymph nodes, when we are sick, they fill up with defences, grow and we can feel them with our fingers. When this happens, we call these lumps adenopathies or lymphadenopathies.

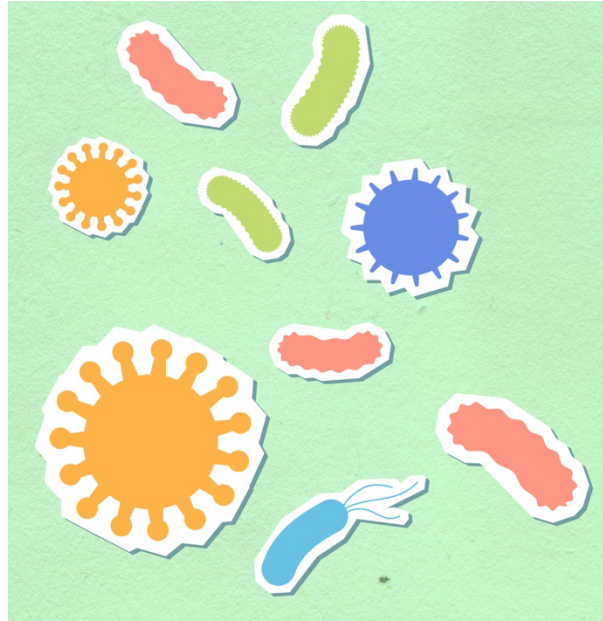


“Diagram of a lymph node CRUK 022” Modified from Cancer Research UK

Therefore, the most common cause of lymphadenopathies is a reaction to an infection in a nearby area of the body. In Lilly's case, who had been suffering from a cold for the last few days, the lymph nodes in her neck had become swollen, which is the most common place for them to appear. As children often get a lot of infections near the neck (colds, pharyngitis, ear infections, etc.) we will normally notice these lumps in the neck or in other nearby areas, such as the nape (back of the neck) or behind the ears.

The most common microorganisms in these infections are viruses and our body, with the help of all these defences, can attack and eliminate these intruders. When this happens, the lymphocytes return to their positions, and the lymph nodes return to their normal size in one or two weeks, and we can no longer see or feel them. Therefore, no treatment is needed to cure them, although we may need to take some pain relief syrup, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, if they bother us.

A child-centric microbiology education framework



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Sometimes, the intruder that has entered our body is a bacterium and we would then need an antibiotic syrup to attack it. So, when the lymph nodes don't go away in two or three weeks, or become bigger than a chickpea, or appear in odd areas of the body such as above the shoulders, we need to visit the paediatrician.

Lilly only needed to take some paracetamol because she had a fever one day. As we have said, the lymph nodes become inflamed to defend us against infection and it is common for us to also have a fever which, as you know, makes the microorganisms weaker and our police lymphocytes can fight them more easily.

Three days after the swollen lymph nodes appeared in her neck, Lilly started to feel much better. She no longer had a cough or sore throat and only needed to blow her nose because she had a bit of a runny nose. The next day, when she woke up, she touched her neck with her fingers and could no longer feel the lumps. The lymph nodes had successfully finished their work and disappeared as if by magic.