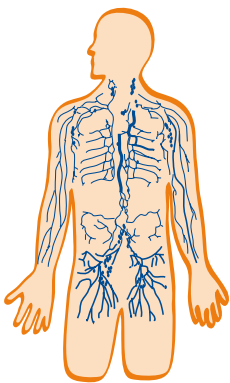


Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma explained

If you or someone you know has recently been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL), then there will be a huge amount of information for you to take on board. The following covers some basics, and more detailed explanations can be found at www.lymphomalife.com

What is non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL)?

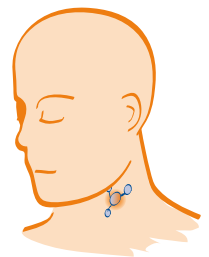
NHL is a form of cancer that affects white blood cells called lymphocytes. Lymphocytes are an important part of the immune system and help your body to fight infection. They are present in both the bloodstream and lymphatic system. In NHL, however, some lymphocytes begin to divide and multiply uncontrollably, often collecting in the vessels of the lymphatic system causing lumps or swellings known as lymphomas.



The lymphatic system

What is the lymphatic system?

White blood cells, such as lymphocytes, flow through the blood vessels and also through a different network of vessels called the lymphatic system. This transports fluid and nutrients around the body and is part of the immune system, which helps us fight infection. Lymphomas are a type of tumour and are often formed in lymph nodes, which are part of the lymphatic system – the firm swellings you can feel at the top of your neck when you are unwell (commonly called ‘glands’) are one of many pairs of lymph nodes in the body. The lymphatic system runs all through the body, so lymphomas can form in any organ.



Swollen lymph node

What is the difference between ‘indolent’ and ‘aggressive’ NHL?

‘Indolent’ NHL describes a slow-growing lymphoma, which often has few or even no symptoms. For this reason a patient can live quite normally for a long time, and it might not even be necessary to begin treatment straight away. Patients with indolent NHL often have normal life expectancy and can live successfully with the disease for many years.

‘Aggressive’ NHL describes a fast-growing lymphoma in which symptoms develop quite quickly and for this reason treatment will usually start shortly after diagnosis. However, there is a good chance of a cure.

How do you get NHL?

No one really knows what causes NHL to develop in individuals, but it's important to understand that it wouldn't have been caused by anything a sufferer has done. You cannot ‘catch’ it and there is no evidence that it is a hereditary condition; meaning it is not passed down from a family member, and it cannot be passed on to a sufferer's children.

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma explained

What are the common symptoms?

The most common symptom of NHL is a painless swelling in the neck, armpit or groin. These are the lymphomas – solid build-ups of lymphocytes, usually at the lymph nodes. Many other symptoms often occur and can depend on where the swellings have formed; for example, shortness of breath or chest pain might occur if a lymphoma occurs in the area of the chest.

Some symptoms happen because the immune system is not functioning properly and the body is finding it harder than normal to fight off infections caused by viruses or bacteria. Therefore, many of the specific symptoms of NHL can be thought of as general feelings of illness.

Apart from the swellings, the most common symptoms of NHL are recurrent or persistent fevers; drenching night sweats; weight loss; tiredness; loss of appetite; persistent itching all over the body; and breathlessness or cough.

How is the condition treated?

The treatment received will depend on the type, or sub-type, of NHL. In the case of indolent NHL, patients may not initially receive any treatment at all. This is referred to as the 'watch-and-wait' approach. This is because treatments for NHL can result in unwanted side effects, and it makes no sense to initiate treatment if a patient is symptom-free and living a relatively normal life. It is not the same as doing nothing; a 'watch-and-wait' patient is closely monitored and receives full medical support. Aggressive NHL usually requires treatment straight away.

There are two main treatment approaches: immunotherapy and chemotherapy.

Immunotherapy uses injections of molecules that stimulate the body's own immune system into attacking the cancerous lymphocytes.

Chemotherapy is the use of a chemical or compound that targets and destroys rapidly dividing cells. These include lymphoma, but also some healthy cells, which can lead to some unpleasant side effects. However, there are medicines patients can take to minimise these.

Patients may receive induction therapy followed by maintenance therapy. Induction therapy is usually the first step in the treatment plan and normally consists of chemotherapy and immunotherapy. In indolent NHL the aim of the initial induction therapy is to reduce symptoms and help achieve remission, which will help prolong life for as long as possible and delay the time until the next treatment. In aggressive NHL the aim of the initial induction therapy is to help lead to either remission or a cure.

If induction therapy is successful and remission is achieved, the patient may be given maintenance therapy, which uses immunotherapy alone. Maintenance therapy aims to prolong the symptom-free period and further delay the progression of the disease.

It's worth remembering that the healthcare team provide more than just medicine; they should be a patient's first port of call for any concerns or issues regarding the condition or potential/ ongoing treatments. Communicating with doctors and working as a team is both encouraged and crucial in order to manage the condition successfully.