

## Exeter Skin Cancer Service

# How to Check your Lymph Nodes

### What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you to understand more about how to check your lymph nodes yourself. It tells you why you should be doing it, what lymph nodes should be checked, how often they should be checked and how to check them, and where you can find out more about this issue.

### Why should you be checking your lymph nodes?

You may have been diagnosed with a skin cancer that can spread into the lymphatic system, for example melanoma or squamous cell carcinoma.

As part of your examination the lymph nodes are examined by your team at follow-up appointments. The lymph nodes examined depend on the location of your skin cancer, e.g. if the skin cancer was on your leg then the lymph nodes in your inguinal area (groin) will be felt, or, if the skin cancer was on your face then the nodes in the head and neck would be examined. The aim is to detect any enlargement of the lymph nodes and undertake investigation at an early stage.

We encourage you to check your own lymph nodes monthly, between clinic appointments; this is why you have been given this leaflet. The aim is to ensure that if there is spread of your skin cancer to the lymph nodes, it is detected and reported to your doctor or nurse straight away, rather than waiting until your next clinic appointment. If you are concerned about anything in this leaflet please contact your doctor or clinical nurse specialist, who will show you again how and which lymph nodes to check.

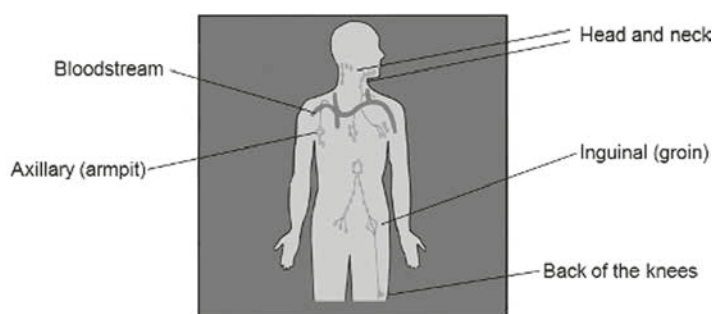
### What are lymph nodes?

#### The Lymphatic System

Lymph nodes are part of the lymphatic system, through which flows lymph, a colourless fluid that bathes the cells of the body, and which drains proteins and waste materials to the blood circulation.

#### Lymphatic Vessels

One way of describing this is to imagine a river that starts as a small stream, which then weaves its way between the cells and small blood vessels of the body's connective tissue. On its journey more tissue fluid and waste materials are collected. The fluid (lymph) that accumulates firstly drains into larger lymphatic vessels, then into ducts in the neck before emptying into the blood stream and then the heart (see Diagram 1).



Source: Wessex Cancer Trust

Diagram 1: Position of lymph nodes

## Lymph Nodes

Lymph nodes are small oval clumps of lymphatic tissue found at intervals along the lymphatic vessels. They are grouped like 'beads on a string' both deep in the body and near the surface (see Diagram 1). These lymph nodes filter out harmful organisms and cells from the lymph before it is returned to the blood stream.

Lymph nodes can only be felt in certain areas:

- head and neck
- arms
- axilla (armpit)
- inguinal area (groin)
- back of knees

Usually lymph nodes are not enlarged and thus cannot be felt, but if you have previously had an infection (such as tonsillitis) you may have noticed and felt your lymph nodes becoming enlarged, painful and tender.

Lymph nodes can also become enlarged (but not usually painful or tender) if cancer cells lodge in them.

## How often should I check my lymph nodes?

Checking the lymph nodes **once a month** is sufficient and this can be done at the same time as you check your skin for any changing moles, and your primary scar. Checking them more often may result in difficulty noticing any change.

**Do not panic if you feel a lymph node (especially if it is tender) as it may be due to an infection, but if it has not gone in a week, contact your doctor or clinical nurse specialist.**

## How to check lymph nodes in the head and neck?

Examine in the order shown, starting at no. 1.



Diagram 2: Sideways view showing lymph nodes

- With your fingertips and a gentle circular motion feel the lymph nodes illustrated
- Start with the nodes in front of the ear (no. 1 in Diagram 2) then follow in order finishing just above the collar bone (no. 10 in Diagram 2)



Source: Wessex Cancer Trust  
Diagram 3: Checking your lymph nodes in front of the ear

- Always check your nodes in this order
- Check both sides for comparison. If you have an enlarged lymph node it may feel like a swelling the size of a pea, sometimes it can be larger

When feeling for the nodes in the neck (no. 8 in Diagram 2):

- Tilt your head towards the side you are examining, this helps to relax the muscle
- Now press your fingers under the muscle



Diagram 4: Checking your lymph nodes in the neck

Source: Wessex Cancer Trust

When checking the lymph nodes above the collar bone:

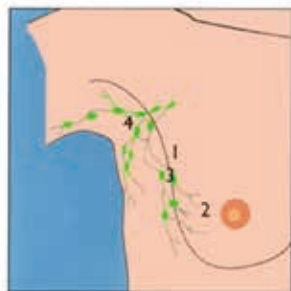
- Hunch your shoulders and bring your elbows forward to relax the skin
- Now feel the area illustrated in diagram 5



Diagram 5: Checking your lymph nodes above the collar bone

Source: Wessex Cancer Trust

## How to check lymph nodes in the armpit?



Source: Wessex Cancer Trust

**Diagram 6:** Checking your lymph nodes in the armpit; location of lymph nodes in the armpit

Remove top clothing down to the waist to get easy access to the armpits:

- Sit in a comfortable position
- Check each armpit in turn

To check the left side lift your arm slightly then place the fingers of your right hand high into the armpit and then lower your arm:

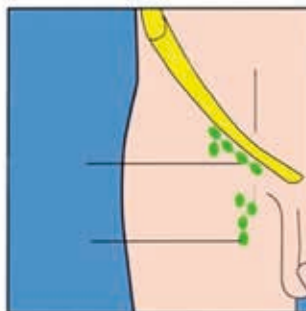
- Feel in the central area of the armpit

Now move your fingers firmly against the chest wall as follows:

- Along the front border of the armpit
- Along the back border of the armpit
- Feel along the inner border of the arm

Now check the other armpit.

## How to check lymph nodes in the groin?



Source: Wessex Cancer Trust

**Diagram 7:** Checking your lymph nodes in the groin

There are two areas to look for inguinal (groin) nodes:

- Feel the horizontal chain of nodes in the right groin just below the ligament (see Diagram 7)
- Feel the vertical chain along the upper thigh (see Diagram 7)

Check the lymph nodes in the other groin.

This leaflet was adapted from the Wessex Cancer Trust leaflet of the same name. It aims to provide accurate information about the subject and is a consensus of the views held by representatives of the British Association of Dermatologists: its contents, however, may occasionally differ from the advice given to you by your doctor.

*This leaflet has been assessed for readability by the British Association of Dermatologists' Patient Information Lay Review Panel*

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by Royal Devon staff undertaking procedures at the Royal Devon hospitals.

© Royal Devon University Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

Designed by Graphics (Print & Design), RD&E (Heavitree)