

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma

What is non-Hodgkin's lymphoma?

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is a cancer of the lymphatic system. Lymphoma is a general term for cancers that develop in the lymphatic system. There are two types of lymphoma - Hodgkin's disease and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Hodgkin is the name of the doctor who, in 1832, recognised these two groups of lymphoma. 85% of all lymphomas are non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

In non-Hodgkin's lymphoma lymphocytes become damaged. They grow and multiply uncontrollably or don't die as they become old. As damaged lymphocytes replace normal lymphocytes, your immune system becomes less able to fight infections. Lymph nodes also become enlarged, forming painless lumps (tumours).

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma may occur in a single lymph node, a group of lymph nodes, or in another organ. Sometimes, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma can appear at the same time in several parts of the body. This type of cancer can spread to almost any part of the body, including the liver, spleen and bone marrow.

The difference between non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and Hodgkin's disease is a cell. Hodgkin's disease contains a cell called Reed Sternberg. This cell is not found in non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Types of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma

There are many different types of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. They are divided into three main groups:

- slow growing (also known as low-grade or indolent lymphoma),
- intermediate,
- fast growing (also called high-grade or aggressive).

Lymphomas are also grouped according to their cell type - either B-cell or T-cell. B-cells develop in the bone marrow of lymphatic organs. T-cells grow in the gland behind the breastbone (thymus). Most people have B-cell lymphoma. T-cell lymphoma usually occurs in adolescents and young adults.

What causes non-Hodgkins lymphoma?

The cause of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is unknown but certain factors are known to increase the chance of developing it. These include:

- immune system problems caused by infections such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- taking drugs that affect the immune system (immuno-suppressants) after organ transplant surgery
- lymphocyte damage caused by a virus.

How common is non-Hodgkin's lymphoma?

The group of cancers known as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is one of the 10 most common cancers in Tasmania. In 2003, about 100 people were diagnosed with the disease.

The chance of developing non-Hodgkin's lymphoma increases as you get older, starting as early as 25.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding non-Hodgkin's lymphoma* on www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php

Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20