

What is Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma?

Actress Jane Fonda has revealed that she has been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL) and has started chemotherapy treatments. While Fonda has not shared the specifics of her diagnosis, the news has people wondering: What exactly is NHL?

According to the Lymphoma Research Foundation, a lymphoma is a cancer that affects lymphocytes, which are white blood cells that travel through the blood and lymphatic system to defend the body against bacteria and viruses. There are three major categories of lymphoma. NHL is the most common, with more than 81,000 people diagnosed with NHL each year in the United States.

Deborah Oyelowo, Hematology/Oncology APRN, OSF HealthCare

"It is a blood cancer, but it affects the lymph nodes. And it is one of the cancers that can metastasize to a lot of body systems and could rapidly progress if it's not caught in time." (:16)

As of 2016, the World Health Organization has classified at least 86 different types of NHL. Because we have lymph nodes throughout our entire body – in the neck, armpits, groin, behind the ears, and back of the head, to name a few – lymphomas can ultimately begin anywhere. Swelling of these lymph nodes can occur for a variety of reasons, however, and may not necessarily indicate cancer.

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"There is a difference between having a common cold and having your lymph nodes inflamed. And there is a difference between swollen, and swollen yet not painful – but it's there." (:10)

You probably have had swollen lymph nodes in your throat when you have been sick. This swelling is associated with the illness and typically goes away once the illness has run its course. However, if you have a swollen lymph node that seems to have appeared out of the blue, Oyelowo advises people to take note of that and to make an appointment with a primary care provider if it does not go away.

Initially, a lymphoma may only present as a swollen lymph node with no other symptoms. The symptoms change, however, as the disease progresses.

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"Because it affects the lymph nodes – and this is our immune system – we start to see fever, chills, unexplained rash, and weight loss for no reason. These are later signs that start from a lymph node that just grows and comes back, swelling and going down by itself. That is something to pay attention to earlier." (:28)

Like with many cancers, family history, age, gender, and race are all considered when determining one's risk for NHL. Risk factors such as a weakened immune system and history of autoimmune disease tend to be more strongly associated with NHL.

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), people with autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, Sjogren disease, celiac disease, and others have increased risk of NHL. When someone has been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease, it means their immune system attacks healthy cells in their body in the same way it would fight germs and infections – essentially putting their immune system in overdrive. The ACS says that this could cause lymphocytes to grow and divide more than normal, increasing the risk of them turning into lymphoma cells.

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"The presenting symptoms will be much different than in a person who does not have autoimmune issues going on. If we have that kind of patient, the presenting signs and symptoms will be more aggressive. If we have a patient with no previous medical problems, but they have a hormonal imbalance or swelling of lymph nodes, we would take a different approach." (:29)

If you have a family history of lymphoma or have been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease, Oyelowo recommends getting any swollen lymph nodes evaluated by your health care provider.

Most importantly, Oyelowo advises individuals to listen to their bodies and to make an appointment with their primary care provider if they are concerned about any abnormal lymph nodes or other symptoms that do not go away on their own. There are successful treatment options available for NHL and other lymphomas, but early detection is key.