

Medicine for Managers

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Lumps and Bumps

We have virtually all developed lumps and bumps. Usually we go to the GP for a diagnosis and a plan about whether it or they should be left or removed. Most of the lumps are harmless and many are left alone. A few are more sinister and need removal or other treatment. The causes and nature of swellings are legion but let's try to summarise the significant ones here.

Lumps vary in size, shape, consistency and location. Some may be found anywhere on the body whilst others are location specific. They may develop as an extension of an existing structure or as a result of it, or they may arise apparently unrelated to the structures which surround them.

For the doctor examining the lump, the vast majority can be diagnosed by simple examination, though some may require further investigation or examination under a microscope following their excision. Many lumps are specific to the area of the body in which they develop and this therefore provides a useful classification of many of them. Others of course may be found distributed over much of the head, trunk and limbs.

General Swellings:

These may have a variety of origins, commonly related to a parent tissue

Enlarged Lymph Nodes

Most people experience swollen lymph glands from time to time. They are a sign of infection and are part of the body's defence mechanism. If an area becomes infected the body fights off infection in part using the glands which become enlarged.

Enlarged glands can often be found in the neck, under the arm or in the groin, although they may be felt elsewhere. Infections causing enlargement may be bacterial or viral and some people experience more generalised lymphadenopathy in glandular fever (***infectious mononucleosis***). Other causes of enlarged glands are much less common than simple infection.

Skin Lesions

- ***Skin Tags:*** These are harmless



growths projecting from the skin, usually on a stalk and commonly found on the neck or under the arms. They are harmless and of no significance and, from a health point of view, may be left alone. Normally requests for removal are for cosmetic reasons.

- **Cysts:** Cysts are fluid-filled lumps, normally filled with fluid, which may be very variable in size. They are



normally completely harmless. There are many different types of cyst. Many people will be familiar with the sebaceous (pilar) cyst), often seen on the scalp and the back, which is frequently removed because it causes inconvenience. Such cysts are filled with an offensive-smelling greasy thick material, which is in fact skin oil. Many cysts contain pus. Cysts feel smooth and firm when touched.

- **Lipomas:** These are fatty lumps felt under the skin. They may produce a swelling which may sometimes be mistaken for a cyst. They are fairly common and may be single or multiple. They can be left alone or may be removed if they are unsightly or uncomfortable. They

feel soft and 'doughy' to the touch and do not have discrete edges.

- **Neurofibromas:** This is a benign (harmless) swelling (tumour) of a nerve sheath. 90% of them are solitary and the remainder occur in people with a condition called neurofibromatosis, in whom they are multiple. They may be flat or on stalks and are usually non-tender. Some types, which are relatively rare, may undergo malignant transformation. They may cause cosmetic deformity. They may be removed.
- **Abscess:** An abscess is a collection of pus as a result of a bacterial infection. When infection attacks, the body responds with its defence mechanisms which include white blood cells to destroy the bacteria. The resulting pus is a mixture of dead organisms, white blood cells, debris and blood.
- Normally an abscess is accompanied by the signs of acute inflammation; pain, swelling, heat and reddening. As the infection is overcome the body walls off the pus in a cavity surrounded by fibrous scar-like material.
- The abscess therefore becomes a cyst. Abscesses may be drained in the acute phase or removed when the infection has been overcome.

Specific Swellings

Some swellings are location specific and the diagnosis is made principally because of the site. There are a large number of different swellings for any location and below are some of the more commonly occurring ones.

The Face

The face is often the site of **allergic reactions** where areas of skin may become swollen (oedematous), particularly round the eyes and the tongue. The result may be wheals (**angioedema**). In severe cases, treatment may be urgent, especially if the airway is compromised.

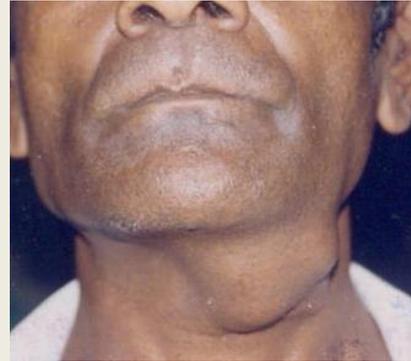
The **salivary glands** may become swollen if they become infected. Perhaps the best known example is **parotid gland** swelling in **mumps**. The glands, located on each side of



the head in front of the ears, become swollen and painful in a proportion of cases, as do other glands such as the testes. Although on occasion testicular swelling may be associated with damage to sperm production, it is rare and the parotid glands recover without any long-term effects.

Sometimes the salivary gland duct (the tube leading from the gland to the mouth

through which saliva passes) becomes blocked by a stone. Such a problem most commonly affects the **submandibular salivary gland** and, when blocked, a swelling appears below the jaw on one side, normally associated with eating. It may be



uncomfortable or sometimes painful. Treatment is by removal of the stone if it is not passed spontaneously.

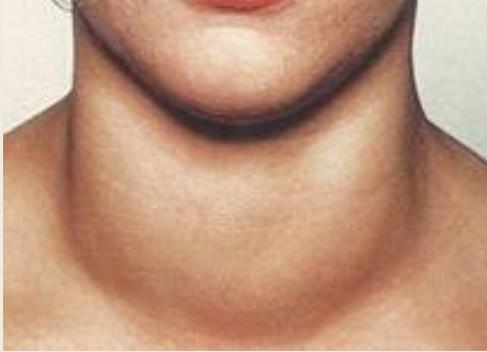
Facial swelling may also accompany a **dental abscess** associated with infection in any of the teeth, usually secondary to decay.

The nerves (pulp) in the centre of the tooth dies, bacteria colonise the dead tissue and infection spreads from the affected tooth into the bone and from there into the soft tissues of the cheeks causing swelling.

Treatment is usually by extraction of the affected tooth and antibiotic as required.

The Neck

The neck is the site of specific swelling called a **goitre**. It is a lump on the front of



the neck which moves up and down with swallowing. It is an enlargement of the thyroid gland which manufactures the thyroid hormones. These are responsible for controlling the body's rate of metabolism. Goitres are usually suspected from examination and normally a diagnosis can be made by measuring blood levels of the thyroid hormones. A goitre may occur as a result of deficiency of iodine (a key component of thyroid hormone).

The Breast

The breast is the site commonly of lumps, most of which are benign and harmless and some of which are cancerous and more sinister. They may be caused by cyst formation, hormonal influences, infection and sometimes by malignant change. No woman should have a lump in her breast and any change in the breast substance must not be ignored but reviewed by a GP as soon as possible. Recovery rates from breast cancer have continued to improve and early diagnosis is key.

The Groin

Aside from things such as enlarged lymph glands, perhaps the most notable swelling is the **hernia**. It is found in the groin or as a



swelling in the scrotum and usually occurs because either fat or a loop of the intestine pokes through a weakness in the muscle of the wall of the anterior abdomen. The weakness is in fact the embryonic structure (**the inguinal canal**) through which the testes descend from the abdomen into the scrotum.

They may gradually enlarge or may appear suddenly after, for example, heavy lifting. Most herniae can be pushed back through the defect.

Most herniae are either repaired by reducing the hernia and closing the defect or, in those patients unfit for surgery, held in place by a truss.

However, surgery is inevitable if the hernia either **obstructs** (a loop of bowel becomes stuck in the inguinal canal resulting in a painful lump in the groin, nausea, vomiting and stomach pain) or **strangulates** (where the blood supply to a part of the intestine is cut off necessitating immediate surgery to avoid death of the affected bowel)

Genital warts may also be found in the genital area and are caused by the *Human*

Papilloma Virus. They may require specialist treatment in a genito-urinary clinic.

The Anus

The causes of anal swelling are to do with the lowest part of the bowel.

- **Haemorrhoids** are swollen veins located



around the anus or the lowest part of the rectum. They may be inside or outside the anus and, if the latter, they may be sore, painful or irritating and may bleed. Diagnosis is usually obvious and treatment is by more fibre in the diet, cream or suppositories to ease the symptoms and shrink the veins, or by injecting or tying off (using rubber bands) the haemorrhoids. Occasionally a full operation (**haemorrhoidectomy**) is necessary.

- **Abscess** a painful collection of pus in the area of the anus associated with local infection and treated by incision of the abscess with a scalpel and drainage.
- **Rectal prolapse** This is a condition where part or all of some of the rectal wall protrudes through the anus. It may occur in sufferers only during the evacuation of the bowel but may occur even when walking. It presents as a lump, protruding from the back passage which can usually be reduced manually. Treatment may be by sclerosing

injections, the placement of an internal rubber ring, particularly in the elderly, or surgery to fix the rectum in position.

The Wrists, Hands and Feet

The extremities are the common sites for a **ganglion**, which is a small, hard, cystic swelling located in association with a



tendon. Their genesis is not clear but they are believed to develop when a tendon is injured. The swelling develops from the covering of the tendon and it contains a thick, jelly-like material consistent with the lubricant of the tendon. The swelling may feel almost bony-hard. They are not of any serious import and they may disappear without interference. Traditionally they are the swellings treated by striking with the family Bible (used, not for religious reasons but because formerly it was the heaviest book in the house). If they persist, are uncomfortable, unsightly or inconvenient they can be removed.

The hands and feet are also common sites of small, scaly, painful swellings due to **warts**. They feel rough to the touch and are

caused by infection with the *Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)*. They are eventually overcome by the body's immune system (though it may take two years to do it) but, if painful they may be treated with applications of salicylic acid or the use of liquid nitrogen or other cryotherapeutic techniques.

In modern healthcare many of the presenting lumps and bumps can be managed these days in general practice. They may be cauterised or treated by a minor surgery procedure under local anaesthetic. Piles can be injected. Other problems can be treated medically. As pressure increases on budgets an ever greater proportion of these straightforward lesions must be near-patient treated to relieve secondary care pressure and to manage the costs. Plenty of primary care doctors have the skills and they should be used wherever possible.

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