Thyroid nodules and swellings – A Quick Guide

A swelling in the neck due to an enlarged thyroid gland is called a goitre. Nodules are lumps in the thyroid gland. Most are harmless but you should arrange an appointment with your doctor as soon as you find a lump or swelling.

Main causes of enlargement of the thyroid
- The main cause is unknown but thyroid nodules and enlargement are more common in women than men
- Women often develop thyroid enlargement during pregnancy
- Diffuse enlargement is often caused by autoimmune thyroid conditions such as Hashimoto's thyroiditis and Graves' disease and can be associated with a change in thyroid function
- Iodine deficiency is the most common cause worldwide

Main types of thyroid nodules and swellings
- Single thyroid nodule (solitary nodule)
- Multiple thyroid nodules (multinodular goitre) - sometimes caused by an overactive thyroid
- Diffuse goitre - often found in Hashimoto’s thyroiditis and Graves’ disease (autoimmune thyroid disorders)
- Retrosternal goitre - thyroid develops lower down behind the breastbone (often a multi-nodular goitre)

More about single nodules
- Colloid and hyperplastic nodules – benign lumps, which can be solitary or part of a multinodular goitre
- Thyroid adenoma - a solid benign lump
- Thyroid cyst - swelling that contains fluid
- Thyroid cancer - rare and has a high cure rate

Investigations
Some of the following investigations may be necessary:
- Blood tests - check thyroid hormone levels
- Ultrasound scan - checks size and shape of thyroid
- Fine needle aspiration cytology (FNAC) - removes cells from the thyroid for examination
- X-rays - to check position of a retrosternal goitre in relation to the windpipe (trachea)
- Nuclear medicine scan - checks size, shape and whether over-active ('hot') or under-active ('cold')

Treatment
If investigations are reassuring and the thyroid swelling or lump is not causing any problems then no treatment may be required. Sometimes the lump may be monitored by follow-up scans.
In some situations your doctor may recommend one or several of the following treatments

- Surgery
- Radioactive iodine
- Antithyroid drugs
- Levothyroxine tablets

Thyroid problems often run in families and if family members are unwell they should be encouraged to discuss with their own GP whether thyroid testing is warranted.

This Quick Guide is one in a series about thyroid disorders. All Quick Guides are available on the British Thyroid Foundation website.

A leaflet containing more detailed information about Thyroid Nodules and Swellings is also available.

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