

A Lump in your Thyroid Gland

You have a lump in your thyroid gland. I hope that this information will help you remember what we discussed in clinic when you came to see me about it.

How was your lump found?

The lump in your thyroid gland might have been discovered in various ways. It may have appeared suddenly and you may have gone to see a doctor urgently. It may have appeared slowly and you may have asked your doctor about it. You may not have noticed it yourself but it may have been noticed incidentally when your neck was being examined for another reason. It may have been discovered when you had a scan on your neck for another reason.

What symptoms is your lump causing?

Often a lump in your thyroid gland will cause no symptoms at all. It may be cosmetically obvious and people may comment on it. Sometimes a sudden painful swelling may occur. Rarely a problem in the thyroid can cause hoarseness of the voice or even swallowing or breathing problems. Symptoms in the throat or neck may be caused by other things, and not be related to the thyroid at all, even if it is enlarged.

What does the thyroid do?

The thyroid makes a hormone called thyroxine. This is needed to keep you healthy. Your body controls your thyroid so that it produces just the right amount of thyroxine. This can be measured with a simple blood test. Sometimes you produce either too much or too little thyroxine. Too much thyroxine makes your body generally speed up – you may feel anxious, not sleep well, lose weight and your heart may race. Without enough thyroxine your body generally slows down – you may feel cold, tired, put on weight and feel miserable. If you make too much thyroxine specialist treatment is required. If you do not make enough, it is simple to take thyroxine as a tablet every day.

Size and function

There is not much relationship between the size and shape of your thyroid and the amount of thyroxine that you produce. A normal sized gland can produce the right amount, too much or too little, and so can an enlarged gland. It is simplest to think about the size of the gland quite separately from the amount of thyroxine that it is producing.

Why is your thyroid enlarged?

Thyroid lumps are very common. Up to one woman in every three may have a lump or lumps in her thyroid gland. There is no particular reason why this happens and no treatment may be necessary. Of course there are more serious causes, including cancer, but thyroid cancer is rare.

Have you got cancer

Statistically speaking, the chance of anyone having thyroid cancer is very low. Some people have a higher risk than others – those with thyroid problems in their family, children with thyroid lumps, those who are very old, those with lumps in the thyroid and in other parts of their neck, those whose thyroids have enlarged over several weeks (rather than over a day or so or over years), and those who have a hoarse voice as well as a large thyroid.

Tests

Tests can be done that will give some idea as to how likely you are to have cancer, but these are only an estimate. An ultrasound scan of your neck may be reassuring or may be suspicious. A sample of cells taken with a needle from your thyroid may be reassuring or may be suspicious or may not be helpful.

Statistics versus individuals

Once your individual history has been considered, you have been examined and you have had your scan and cell sampling results your specialist will discuss things with you. Your specialist will try to give an estimate of how likely you are to have anything to worry about. This will be no more than an estimate based on statistics from lots of other people's results. The specialist cannot be absolutely certain at this stage exactly why you as a specific individual have an enlarged thyroid.

Surgery

The only way to be absolutely certain what your thyroid enlargement is due to is to have the enlarged part of the gland surgically removed and sent for detailed microscopic examination. Although not a major operation, it is by no means trivial, and there are some risks associated with it. Your specialist will discuss the pros and cons of surgery with you in the light of the results of your tests and your individual circumstances. The ultimate decision rests with you, once everything has been explained. If you decide against surgery initially, usually you will be reassessed and your tests will be repeated six months later to see if there has been any change.