THYROID NODULES AND SWELLINGS

What are thyroid nodules and swellings?

An enlarged thyroid gland causes a swelling in the neck called a goitre. The thyroid gland may also have lumps called nodules. Mostly these nodules are harmless but you must meet your doctor as soon as you find a lump or swelling. It is well recognised that 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.

What are the main causes of enlargement of the thyroid gland?

The thyroid nodules and thyroid enlargement are more common in women than men but their cause is unknown and increase in frequency with age.

Women often develop thyroid enlargement during pregnancy and menopause.

If you notice a nodule or swelling in your neck you should see your doctor with a minimum of delay. Your doctor will assess the swelling and refer you to a specialist clinic if needed. Most nodules and swellings are harmless, but it is always best to have them checked promptly in case they are among the few that are cancerous.

What are the main types of thyroid nodules and swellings?

The most common types are as follows:

- Single thyroid nodule (solitary nodule)
- Multiple thyroid nodules (multinodular goitre)
- Diffuse goitre.
- Retrosternal goitre.
The following are types of thyroid nodules:

- Colloid and Hyperplastic nodules
- Thyroid adenoma
- Thyroid cyst
- Thyroid cancer

**What are the usual tests performed to investigate thyroid lumps and swellings?**

There are various tests that can be carried out to find the cause of your thyroid problem. These include:

- **Blood tests** – this is the first test performed and is done to ensure that your thyroid is not over- or under-active.
- **Ultrasound scan** - this is a painless procedure and uses sound waves from a probe to examine the structure of the thyroid gland. It can establish the number and size of nodules in the thyroid and can give important information on the likelihood that a nodule is benign or a cancer.
- **Fine needle aspiration cytology (FNAC)** – In this procedure cells are removed from the thyroid for examination under a microscope.
- **X-rays** - a CT scan (a special form of X-ray) may be performed to check the position of a retrosternal goitre in relation to the windpipe (trachea) and the oesophagus.
- **Nuclear medicine scan** - this checks the size, shape, and position of the thyroid and detects areas that are over-active or under-active.

**What is the treatment?**

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

- Surgery
- Radioactive iodine
- Antithyroid drugs
- Levothyroxine tablets
Stay Healthy, Stay Happy!