Lymphoma

The May 9, 2007, issue of JAMA includes an article reporting an increased risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoma among persons with hepatitis C virus infection. This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the April 11, 2001, issue of JAMA.

WHAT IS THE LYMPHATIC SYSTEM?

The lymphatic system includes an extensive network of lymphatic vessels and lymph nodes, and lymphoid tissue in the spleen, gastrointestinal tract, tonsils, and adenoids. The lymphatic vessels transport lymph—excess fluid from body tissues that also contains protein, immune cells, and waste products. As the lymph passes through the lymph nodes and spleen, old blood cells, organisms that may cause disease, and foreign substances are filtered out. Lymph is then returned to the circulatory system via the right lymphatic duct and the thoracic duct.

WHAT IS LYMPHOMA?

Lymphoma is a cancer that originates in the lymphoid tissue when lymphocytes, a type of immune cell, become malignant and multiply, crowding out normal cells. Lymphomas are classified as either Hodgkin disease or non-Hodgkin lymphoma. One way the 2 types of lymphoma are distinguished is by viewing the diseased cells under a microscope. The abnormal cells found in Hodgkin disease (Reed-Sternberg cells) are distinct from those found in the tissue of non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

SYMPTOMS OF NON-HODGKIN LYMPHOMA

The most common symptom of non-Hodgkin lymphoma is painless swelling of the lymph nodes in the neck, underarm, or groin. Other symptoms may include:

- Unexplained fever
- Night sweats
- Constant fatigue
- Unexplained weight loss
- Itchy skin
- Reddened patches on the skin

All of the above symptoms can be caused by other conditions or diseases. If you are experiencing these symptoms, be sure to see your doctor so that he or she can determine the cause.

RISK FACTORS FOR NON-HODGKIN LYMPHOMA

- Sex—men are more likely than women to develop non-Hodgkin lymphoma
- Environmental factors—exposure to certain chemicals, including some pesticides, solvents, or fertilizers
- Older age
- Weakened immune system—reduced immunity resulting from conditions such as HIV infection or from immunosuppressant drugs for organ transplants

Sources: National Cancer Institute, American Society of Clinical Oncology, American Cancer Society, AMA Home Medical Library, AMA Family Medical Guide, AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

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