

Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma for the Pediatric Patient

What is non-Hodgkin's lymphoma?

Cancers involving lymphoid tissue are called lymphomas. All forms of lymphoma other than Hodgkin's disease are grouped together as non-Hodgkin's lymphomas (NHL). In children, types of NHL include small, non-cleaved lymphoma (Burkitt's or non-Burkitt's lymphoma), large cell lymphoma, and lymphoblastic lymphoma. Lymphoid tissue includes all lymph nodes found in the body, such as those in the neck, armpits, chest, abdomen, and groin. Because there is lymph tissue in many parts of the body, NHL can start almost anywhere and can spread to almost any organ or tissue, including the liver, bone marrow, and spleen.

NHL accounts for approximately 60% of all lymphomas. In children, NHL occurs most frequently between the ages of 5 and 15 years, and males are affected more often than females. There is an increased incidence in children with immunodeficiency.

What are the symptoms of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma?

Patients with NHL may present with abdominal pain or respiratory symptoms, depending on the site of the disease. Painless enlargement of lymph nodes is common. Weight loss, fever, and fatigue occur less frequently.

How is non-Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosed and treated?

If your child has symptoms of NHL, your doctor will check for swelling or lumps in the neck, underarms, groin, and abdomen. If a lymph node doesn't feel normal, or a lump is found in the chest or abdomen, the doctor may need to obtain a biopsy of the lymph node or lump. Once NHL is found, more tests will be done to find out if the cancer has spread from where it started to other parts of the body. This is called staging. It is important to know the stage of the disease to plan treatment.

The tests that may be done to determine the stage of disease include chest x-rays, CT scans of the chest and abdomen, ultrasound scans, spinal taps and bone marrow biopsies.

The main treatment for NHL is chemotherapy, but radiation therapy may be used in special situations.