Hodgkin disease (Hodgkin lymphoma) is a type of lymphoma, a cancer that starts in white blood cells called lymphocytes. Lymphocytes are part of the body’s immune system. There are 2 kinds of lymphomas:

- Hodgkin disease (named after Dr. Thomas Hodgkin, who recognized it in 1832)
- Non-Hodgkin lymphoma

These 2 main types of lymphomas differ in how they behave, spread, and respond to treatment. Doctors can usually tell the difference between them by looking at the cancer cells under a microscope. In some cases, sensitive lab tests may be needed to tell them apart.1

The lymph system and lymphoid tissue
To understand what Hodgkin disease is, it helps to know something about the body’s lymph system.
The lymph system (also known as the lymphatic system) is composed mainly of lymphoid tissue, lymph vessels, and a clear fluid called lymph. Lymphoid tissue includes the lymph nodes and related organs that are part of the body’s immune and blood-forming systems, such as the spleen and bone marrow.1

Start and spread of Hodgkin disease
Because lymphoid tissue is in many parts of the body, Hodgkin disease can start almost anywhere. Most often it starts in lymph nodes in the upper part of the body. The most common sites are in the chest, in the neck, or under the arms.
Hodgkin disease most often spreads through the lymph vessels to nearby lymph nodes in a stepwise fashion from lymph node to lymph node. Rarely, and late in the disease, it may invade the bloodstream and spread to other sites in the body, including the liver, lungs, and/or bone marrow.1