SYMPTOM

Edema

Edema is swelling caused by fluid collecting in the body's tissues.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
My skin feels puffy, tight, or heavy

WHERE IT IS FELT
Usually the feet, ankles, legs, hands, or face

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Long sitting or standing, pregnancy, some medicines

WHEN IT IS URGENT
One suddenly swollen, painful, red, or warm leg

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to weeks, based on the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Swelling is persistent, worsening, unexplained, or recurring

Overview

Edema is swelling caused by excess fluid collecting in body tissues. It often affects the feet, ankles, and lower legs, but can occur almost anywhere. One limb or both sides of the body may be affected.

Mild edema can follow prolonged sitting or standing, pregnancy, or a salty meal. Persistent or widespread edema may be related to medicines, poor blood flow in the veins, or conditions affecting the heart, kidneys, liver, or lymphatic system.

Edema is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Its importance depends on its location, how quickly it appeared, and whether other symptoms are present.

What it may feel or look like

The area may look enlarged or puffy. Skin can feel stretched, tight, heavy, or uncomfortable, and shoes, socks, rings, or clothing may feel tighter.

Pressing the area may leave a dent for several seconds, called pitting edema . Some swelling, including certain forms of lymphatic swelling, feels firmer and does not leave a dent.

Other changes can include:

Redness, warmth, marked tenderness, or leaking skin needs medical attention, particularly if it develops quickly.

- Shiny, stretched, or discoloured skin
- Aching, stiffness, or reduced movement
- Sock marks around the ankles
- Swelling that worsens later in the day
- Sudden weight gain from fluid buildup

Common causes

Common causes include prolonged sitting or standing, hot weather, high salt intake, and pregnancy. Gravity draws fluid toward the lower legs, so swelling may improve with movement or raising the legs.

In chronic venous insufficiency , valves in the leg veins do not move blood efficiently toward the heart. Fluid can collect in the lower legs, causing ankle swelling, aching, visible veins, or brownish skin changes.

Some blood pressure medicines, anti-inflammatory pain medicines, steroids like prednisone or hydrocortisone , hormones, and diabetes medicines can cause edema. Do not stop prescribed medicine on your own; ask the prescriber whether it may be contributing.

Less common causes include heart, kidney, liver, or thyroid problems. Damage or blockage in the lymphatic system can cause lymphedema , often in one arm or leg.

Urgent causes include deep vein thrombosis, a blood clot in a deep leg vein, and skin infection. These are more likely when one limb suddenly becomes swollen, painful, red, or warm.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if swelling occurs with:

These symptoms can indicate a serious breathing or circulation problem.

Seek same-day care if one leg suddenly becomes swollen, painful, red, or warm. Also get prompt help for swelling with fever, rapidly spreading redness, severe pain, or much less urine than usual.

During pregnancy or shortly after delivery, seek urgent advice for sudden swelling of the face

or hands, especially with severe headache, vision changes, shortness of breath, or pain below the ribs.

Arrange a routine appointment if edema is unexplained, recurring, worsening, or does not settle. Also seek advice for persistent swelling in one limb, skin sores or colour changes, or swelling that affects daily activities.

- Sudden shortness of breath, chest pain, faintness, or coughing blood
- Swelling of the tongue, lips, or throat with trouble breathing
- Severe breathing difficulty or confusion

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling began, whether it affects one or both sides, and what changes it. They may ask about pain, breathlessness, recent travel, pregnancy, injuries, health conditions, and medicines.

They may examine the skin, compare the limbs, press the swollen area, listen to your heart and lungs, and check blood pressure and weight.

Tests are not always needed. Depending on your symptoms, blood or urine tests may assess kidney, liver, thyroid, or heart function. Ultrasound can check for a blood clot or vein problems. Heart tests may be considered if there are signs of heart-related fluid buildup.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Swelling from prolonged sitting may improve with movement, while edema related to medicine or illness may need specific treatment.

For mild swelling without urgent symptoms:

Compression stockings can help some forms of leg edema, particularly swelling related to veins. They are unsuitable for some people with poor arterial blood flow. Ask a healthcare professional about the correct type and fit before using them for unexplained or significant swelling.

Diuretics, or water tablets like furosemide or hydrochlorothiazide , remove salt and water through urine. They are prescription medicines and do not suit every cause. Do not use someone else's medicine or change your dose without medical advice.

- Raise the swollen limb when resting

- Take regular walking or movement breaks
- Avoid tight clothing or socks
- Wash the skin gently and use moisturiser
- Reduce very salty foods if advised

What to expect

Short-term edema from sitting, standing, heat, or a salty meal may improve within hours or after a night's rest. Pregnancy-related swelling often varies and usually improves after delivery.

Edema caused by vein problems, lymphedema, or a long-term condition may require ongoing management to reduce swelling, protect the skin, improve comfort, and prevent complications.

A sudden change from your usual pattern needs reassessment, even if you have had edema before.

Common questions

Is edema the same as swelling?

Edema is swelling caused by fluid in the tissues. Swelling can also result from bleeding, inflammation, injury, or an enlarged structure.

Does a dent after pressing the skin reveal the cause?

No. Pitting shows that movable fluid is present, but many conditions can cause it. Location, timing, and other symptoms also matter.

Can eating salt make edema worse?

Salt encourages water retention and may worsen swelling. It is rarely the only explanation for persistent or substantial edema.

Should I massage a swollen leg?

Avoid massaging a suddenly swollen, painful, red, or warm leg until a blood clot has been ruled out. For diagnosed lymphedema, specialised massage may be part of a clinician-directed treatment plan.

Sources

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