SYMPTOM

Facial swelling

Facial swelling is puffiness or enlargement affecting part or all of the face.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Puffiness, tightness, or fullness in the face

WHERE IT IS FELT
Cheeks, eyelids, lips, jaw, or the whole face

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Minor injuries, allergies, dental problems

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Painful redness, fever, or swelling around one eye

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to days, based on the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Swelling persists, returns, or has no clear trigger

Overview

Facial swelling means that fluid or inflammation has enlarged part or all of your face. It may affect one side, both sides, or a small area such as an eyelid, lip, or cheek.

Many causes are temporary, including minor injuries, insect bites, and mild allergic reactions. Swelling can also come from a tooth, skin infection, blocked salivary gland, medicine, or a condition affecting fluid balance.

The location, speed of onset, and other symptoms often provide useful clues. Facial swelling is a symptom, not a diagnosis.

What it may feel or look like

Your face may look puffy or uneven. The skin can feel tight, heavy, warm, itchy, tender, or painful. Swelling around the eyes may make them difficult to open fully.

Other symptoms depend on the cause. For example:

Notice when the swelling began, how quickly it developed, and whether it affects one or both sides. A photograph can help you track changes.

- Itching or raised welts called hives may suggest an allergic reaction
- Toothache or gum pain may point to a dental problem
- Redness, warmth, and tenderness can occur with infection
- Bruising may follow an injury
- Nasal congestion and facial pressure may occur with sinus inflammation

Common causes

Minor injury or irritation can cause local swelling. Examples include a bump, insect bite, sunburn, cosmetic product, or skin treatment. Bruising or itching may occur as well.

Allergic reactions may cause swelling of the eyelids, lips, or face. Angioedema is swelling in the deeper layers beneath the skin. It may occur with hives and itching, but not always. Food, insect stings, latex, and medicines can be triggers.

Dental problems often cause swelling on one side of the cheek or jaw. A tooth infection may also cause toothache, gum swelling, a bad taste, or pain when biting. Dental infections need assessment because they do not reliably clear without treatment.

Skin infections , including cellulitis, can make an area swollen, red, warm, and painful. Fever or feeling unwell may occur.

Less common causes include a blocked or infected salivary gland, especially when swelling worsens during meals. Fluid buildup related to kidney, liver, heart, or thyroid problems can cause broader puffiness, sometimes with swelling elsewhere.

Rare but urgent causes include a severe allergic reaction, infection around the eye, or a dental infection spreading into the neck.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if facial swelling comes with:

These can be signs of anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction. It can happen without a rash.

Seek same-day medical care for swelling around an eye with redness, fever, severe pain, pain when moving the eye, reduced vision, or an eye that appears pushed forward. Infection around the eye can threaten vision and needs prompt treatment.

You also need same-day assessment if swelling is rapidly spreading, follows a serious injury, or occurs with fever and severe dental pain. Difficulty opening your mouth, swallowing saliva, or

swelling under the jaw requires urgent care.

Book a routine appointment if swelling has no clear cause, keeps returning, or does not begin to improve within a few days. Arrange an appointment sooner if you also develop ankle swelling, unusual urine changes, unexplained weight change, or ongoing fatigue.

- Trouble breathing, swallowing, or speaking
- Swelling of the tongue, mouth, or throat
- Wheezing, faintness, confusion, or blue-grey lips
- Rapidly worsening swelling after food, medicine, or an insect sting

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling started and what happened beforehand. They may ask about foods, insect stings, dental symptoms, recent injuries, skin products, and medicines. Some blood pressure medicines and anti-inflammatory medicines can cause angioedema.

They will examine the location and texture of the swelling and look for redness, warmth, rash, dental problems, or eye symptoms. They may also check your mouth, throat, lymph nodes, breathing, and other areas for fluid buildup.

Testing is not always needed. Depending on your symptoms, you may need a dental examination, blood or urine tests, allergy assessment, or imaging such as an ultrasound or scan.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. A mild injury or bite may improve with a cool, clean compress and sleeping with your head slightly raised. Do not place ice directly on your skin.

Avoid a suspected cosmetic or skin product until the reaction has settled. A pharmacist can advise whether a non-prescription antihistamine like cetirizine or loratadine is suitable for mild allergy symptoms. Antihistamines are not a substitute for emergency treatment when breathing or throat symptoms occur.

A dental abscess may need drainage or treatment of the affected tooth. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline are sometimes needed, but they do not replace dental care. Bacterial skin infections usually require prescribed antibiotics.

If swelling began after starting a medicine, seek medical advice promptly. Do not take another dose of a suspected non-essential product until you have received advice. Do not stop an essential prescription medicine on your own unless an emergency clinician tells you to do so.

What to expect

Swelling from a minor injury, bite, or mild irritation often settles as the inflammation improves. Allergic swelling may resolve after the trigger is removed, but it can return if you encounter the trigger again.

Infections and dental problems may worsen without appropriate treatment. Swelling caused by fluid retention may continue until the underlying condition is addressed.

Seek reassessment if treatment has started but the swelling is spreading, pain is increasing, fever develops, or you feel more unwell.

Common questions

Can sleeping cause a puffy face?

Fluid can collect around the eyelids overnight, especially after poor sleep or a salty meal. Mild puffiness should improve after you get up. Persistent or marked swelling deserves medical review.

Can sinusitis make my face swell?

Sinus inflammation can cause pressure and fullness around the cheeks or eyes. Clear visible swelling, especially around one eye with redness, fever, vision changes, or pain on eye movement, needs urgent assessment.

Should I massage facial swelling?

Not unless a healthcare professional has recommended it for a known cause. Massage can worsen pain after an injury and is not appropriate over an infection.

What if the swelling keeps returning?

Keep a record of timing, foods, medicines, activities, and other symptoms. Repeated episodes should be assessed, even if they settle on their own.

Sources

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- Angioedema , NHS
- Dental abscess , NHS
- Cellulitis , NHS
- Anaphylaxis: Recognition and Management , American Family Physician , 2020