SYMPTOM

Foot, leg, and ankle swelling

Foot, leg, and ankle swelling is enlargement caused by fluid buildup or inflamed tissue.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Shoes feel tight and skin may look puffy

WHERE IT IS FELT
Feet, ankles, lower legs, or one whole leg

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Prolonged standing, minor injuries, vein problems

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden one-sided swelling, pain, warmth, or redness

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to weeks, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, recurring, worsening, or unexplained swelling

Overview

Swelling in a foot, ankle, or leg often happens when fluid collects in the tissues. This is called edema . It can also result from inflammation after an injury or infection.

Swelling may affect one or both legs and appear suddenly or gradually. Some causes are temporary, while others need assessment and ongoing care. The pattern can provide clues, but the symptom alone cannot show the cause.

What it may feel or look like

Shoes, socks, or trousers may feel tighter. Sock marks can deepen, ankle bones may look less defined, and the skin may appear stretched or shiny.

Pressing the area for several seconds may leave a temporary dent, known as pitting edema . Swelling that does not pit may still be important.

Other symptoms include:

Notice whether one or both legs are affected, when swelling began, and what changes it.

- Aching, heaviness, stiffness, or tenderness
- Red, warm, bruised, itchy, or discoloured skin
- Visible or enlarged veins
- Swelling that improves overnight but returns later
- Shortness of breath or reduced ability to exercise

Common causes

Common causes include prolonged sitting or standing, hot weather, pregnancy, minor injuries, and, in some people, eating a lot of salt.

Weak valves in the leg veins can allow blood to collect in the lower legs. This chronic venous insufficiency may cause recurring ankle swelling, aching, visible veins, or brownish skin changes.

Some blood pressure medicines, anti-inflammatory pain medicines, steroids like prednisone or hydrocortisone , hormones, and medicines for nerve pain can cause swelling. Do not stop prescribed medicine without speaking to the prescriber.

Less common causes include heart, kidney, liver, or thyroid problems, which often cause swelling in both legs. Damage or blockage in the lymphatic system can cause lymphedema , sometimes after surgery, cancer treatment, infection, or injury.

Urgent possible causes include deep vein thrombosis (DVT), a blood clot in a deep leg vein. It often causes new one-sided swelling with pain, warmth, or redness. A skin infection can cause rapidly increasing swelling, hot and painful skin, and sometimes fever.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if leg swelling occurs with:

These symptoms can occur if a clot travels to the lungs or the heart or lungs are under strain.

Seek same-day care for sudden one-sided swelling, especially with pain, warmth, redness, or tenderness. Get prompt care for rapidly spreading redness, fever, severe pain, a cold or pale foot, or swelling after a serious injury.

During pregnancy, seek urgent advice for sudden or marked swelling with severe headache, vision changes, upper abdominal pain, breathing trouble, or swelling of the face or hands. These may indicate pre-eclampsia.

Book a routine appointment if swelling is unexplained, lasts more than a few days, keeps returning, or worsens. Arrange earlier follow-up for skin sores, increasing skin changes, or a known heart, kidney, liver, or vein condition.

- New or severe difficulty breathing
- Chest pain, fainting, or marked light-headedness
- Coughing up blood
- Blue, grey, or unusually pale lips or skin

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when swelling started, whether it affects one or both legs, and whether it changes with movement, rest, or elevation. They may ask about travel, injuries, pregnancy, surgery, medical conditions, and medicines.

They may examine the skin, veins, pulses, heart, and lungs, test for pitting, and compare both legs.

Tests depend on the findings. Ultrasound can check for a clot or vein problems. Blood and urine tests may look for kidney, liver, thyroid, or heart-related causes. Heart or chest tests may be needed if symptoms suggest a heart or lung problem.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Sprains, infections, blood clots, vein problems, lymphedema, and heart conditions require different approaches.

For mild swelling related to prolonged sitting or standing:

Compression socks may help vein-related swelling but are not suitable for everyone. Ask a healthcare professional before using them for new or unexplained swelling, especially if you have poor blood flow in the leg arteries.

Do not take "water tablets like furosemide or hydrochlorothiazide ," or diuretics, unless prescribed for a diagnosed reason. They do not treat every cause and can have unwanted effects. If medicine may be contributing, ask the prescriber whether it should be adjusted.

- Walk or gently move your ankles regularly
- Raise your legs when resting

- Avoid staying in one position for long periods
- Wear comfortable shoes and avoid tight clothing
- Keep swollen skin clean and moisturised

What to expect

Swelling caused by sitting, standing, heat, or a minor injury may improve within hours or days. Elevation and movement may help.

Swelling from chronic vein problems often returns, particularly later in the day. Lymphedema and swelling related to long-term conditions may need ongoing management.

Seek follow-up if improvement does not occur. Earlier assessment is needed if swelling becomes one-sided, painful, red, or associated with breathing symptoms.

Common questions

Is all leg swelling fluid retention?

No. Edema is fluid in the tissues, but injury, inflammation, infection, and bleeding under the skin can also cause swelling.

Why is only one leg swollen?

One-sided swelling can result from injury, infection, vein problems, lymphatic blockage, or a blood clot. Sudden unexplained swelling in one leg needs same-day assessment.

Can swelling be normal during pregnancy?

Gradual swelling of both feet and ankles is common later in pregnancy. Sudden swelling or swelling with headache, vision changes, upper abdominal pain, breathing trouble, or facial swelling needs urgent advice.

Should I reduce salt?

Salt may worsen fluid retention in some people, but it does not cause every swollen ankle. Discuss persistent swelling before making major dietary changes.

Will exercise help?

Gentle walking and ankle movement can improve blood return after prolonged sitting or standing. Avoid exercising through severe pain or after a significant injury until assessed.

Sources

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