SYMPTOM

Joint swelling

Joint swelling is enlargement around a joint caused by extra fluid or inflamed tissue.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A joint feels puffy, tight, stiff, or painful

WHERE IT IS FELT
Around joints such as knees, ankles, fingers, or elbows

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Minor injury, osteoarthritis, inflammation around the joint

WHEN IT IS URGENT
A suddenly hot, red joint, especially with fever

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to weeks, depending on injury, inflammation, or illness

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Swelling persists, returns, or limits normal movement

Overview

Joint swelling means that a joint or the area around it looks or feels enlarged. It may happen when extra fluid collects inside the joint, when the joint lining becomes inflamed, or when nearby tissues swell.

One joint may be affected, or several joints may swell at the same time. The swelling can appear suddenly after an injury or develop gradually. It may occur with pain, warmth, redness, stiffness, or reduced movement.

Joint swelling is a symptom rather than a diagnosis. Possible causes range from a minor sprain to arthritis, gout, infection, or another health condition. The pattern of swelling and any other symptoms help narrow down the cause.

What it may feel or look like

A swollen joint may look larger or less clearly shaped than the same joint on the other side. Skin over it may appear stretched or shiny. Rings, shoes, or clothing may feel tighter near the affected area.

You may notice:

Swelling around a joint is not always coming from inside it. Inflamed tendons or bursae can also cause a lump or puffiness. Tendons connect muscles to bones. Bursae are small, fluid-filled cushions that reduce friction around joints.

- Puffiness, fullness, or pressure around the joint
- Stiffness, especially after resting or waking
- Pain during movement or when putting weight on the joint
- Warmth or redness
- Difficulty fully bending or straightening the joint
- Clicking, locking, or a feeling that the joint may give way

Common causes

Minor injuries are frequent causes of swelling. A sprain, strain, bruise, or repeated movement can irritate tissues around a joint. Swelling may begin soon after an injury or build over several hours.

Osteoarthritis can cause intermittent swelling, stiffness, and pain. This condition involves changes to cartilage and other joint tissues. Symptoms often affect knees, hips, hands, or the spine and may worsen with activity.

Inflammation around the joint can come from bursitis or tendon irritation. This may follow repetitive activity, prolonged pressure, or a sudden increase in exercise.

Other possible causes include:

Less commonly, swelling may be linked to lupus, Lyme disease in areas where it occurs, or another inflammatory condition. Symptoms alone may not show which cause is responsible.

- Gout , in which urate crystals trigger sudden inflammation, often in one joint
- Rheumatoid arthritis , an immune-system condition that often causes persistent swelling in several joints
- Psoriatic arthritis , which can occur with the skin condition psoriasis
- Reactive arthritis , which may begin after certain infections elsewhere in the body
- Bleeding into a joint , particularly after injury or in people with a bleeding disorder or taking blood-thinning medicine
- Joint infection , also called septic arthritis, which needs prompt medical assessment

When to seek medical care

Seek same-day urgent medical care if a joint becomes suddenly swollen, hot, very painful, or red, especially if you have a fever or feel unwell. A joint infection must be considered quickly because early treatment can help prevent lasting joint damage.

You should also seek urgent assessment for sudden swelling if you have recently had joint surgery, an injection into the joint, a joint replacement, or an infection elsewhere in your body.

Go to an emergency department after an injury if:

Book a routine appointment if swelling lasts more than several days without improving, keeps returning, affects several joints, or interferes with sleep or everyday activities. Arrange an appointment sooner if you have prolonged morning stiffness, unexplained weight loss, a new rash, or ongoing fatigue.

- The joint looks deformed or out of place
- You cannot put weight on the limb or use it
- The limb becomes pale, blue, cold, numb, or weak
- There is heavy bleeding or bone visible through a wound
- You feel faint, confused, severely unwell, or short of breath

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling started, whether there was an injury, and whether one or several joints are involved. They may ask about fever, skin changes, recent illness, medicines, psoriasis, tick exposure, and any history of arthritis or gout.

The examination usually checks warmth, redness, tenderness, movement, and whether the swelling is inside the joint or in nearby tissue.

Depending on the findings, tests may include:

Joint fluid can be checked for bacteria, crystals, or blood. Removing fluid may also ease pressure, but it should be done by a trained healthcare professional.

- An X-ray, ultrasound, or other scan
- Blood tests for inflammation, infection, or certain immune conditions
- Testing fluid removed from the joint with a needle

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. A minor soft-tissue injury may improve with protection and gradual return to movement. Inflammatory arthritis may need medicines that control the immune response. Gout, infection, and bleeding into a joint each require different treatment.

For mild swelling after a minor injury, you can:

Avoid placing ice directly on the skin. Do not try to drain or inject a swollen joint yourself.

Over-the-counter pain medicines may help some people, but they are not suitable for everyone. Follow the package directions and ask a pharmacist or healthcare professional if you have kidney disease, stomach ulcers, heart problems, take blood thinners like warfarin or apixaban , are pregnant, or use other medicines.

Do not rely on self-care alone for a hot, red joint or swelling with fever.

- Reduce activities that make the swelling worse
- Apply a cold pack wrapped in cloth for short periods
- Raise the limb when practical
- Keep the joint gently moving within a comfortable range

What to expect

Swelling from a minor injury often begins to settle over several days, although full recovery may take longer. Swelling linked to osteoarthritis can come and go. Gout attacks often start suddenly, while inflammatory arthritis may cause ongoing or repeated symptoms.

Recovery depends on the cause, the joint involved, and whether there is damage or infection. Persistent swelling may gradually weaken nearby muscles and reduce movement, so follow-up is important if the joint is not returning to normal.

Keep note of when swelling appears, how long it lasts, and which joints are affected. Photographs can help show changes that are no longer visible by the time of an appointment.

Common questions

Can a joint be swollen without being painful?

Yes. A joint may contain extra fluid or have mild inflammation without much pain. Painless swelling that persists or returns still deserves routine assessment.

Does redness always mean infection?

No. Gout, injury, and inflammatory arthritis can also cause redness and warmth. However, a suddenly red, hot, swollen joint should be assessed urgently because infection cannot be ruled out by appearance alone.

Should I keep moving a swollen joint?

Gentle movement may reduce stiffness after a minor injury, but avoid forcing the joint or continuing an activity that sharply increases pain. Follow specific advice if there may be a fracture, serious injury, infection, or recent surgery.

Can food cause joint swelling?

Food does not explain most swollen joints. In people with gout, diet and alcohol can influence urate levels, but many other factors are involved. Sudden swelling should not be assumed to be food-related without assessment.

Sources

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