SYMPTOM

Lumps

Lumps are bumps or swellings under the skin or deeper in the body.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A new bump that may be soft, firm, tender, or painless

WHERE IT IS FELT
Under the skin or deeper anywhere in the body

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Skin cysts, fatty lumps, swollen glands

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Trouble breathing or swallowing with face, mouth, or neck swelling

USUALLY LASTS
Days to years, depending on infection, injury, or growth type

SEE A DOCTOR IF
New, growing, hard, painful, or present beyond two weeks

Overview

A lump is an area of swelling or tissue that feels different from the area around it. It may sit in the skin, just beneath it, or deeper inside the body.

Many lumps are caused by harmless conditions, such as a skin cyst or a fatty growth called a lipoma. Others develop because of infection, inflammation, injury, or a hernia. Less often, a lump is caused by cancer.

How a lump feels can offer clues, but it cannot confirm the cause. A harmless lump may feel firm, while a concerning lump may be soft. Its location, growth, associated symptoms, and how long it has been present are also important.

What it may feel or look like

A lump may be as small as a pea or large enough to change the shape of an area. It might be round and smooth, uneven, or difficult to define.

Some lumps move slightly when pressed. Others feel attached to the skin or deeper tissues. The skin over a lump may look normal, red, bruised, or stretched.

A lump may be:

Swollen lymph nodes, sometimes called swollen glands, often appear in the neck, armpits, or groin. Lymph nodes are small parts of the immune system that can enlarge while your body fights an infection.

- Soft, rubbery, firm, or hard
- Painless, tender, itchy, or warm
- Stable in size or gradually growing
- Alone or part of a group of swellings

Common causes

Common causes

A skin cyst is a closed sac beneath the skin that may contain fluid or thick material. Cysts are often smooth and slow-growing. They can become sore and red if inflamed or infected.

A lipoma is a noncancerous growth of fatty tissue. It usually feels soft or rubbery, moves slightly under the skin, and grows slowly.

Lymph nodes commonly swell during infections such as colds, sore throats, dental infections, or skin infections. They often become tender and then shrink after the infection improves.

Injuries can cause swelling or a collection of blood called a haematoma . Bruising may be visible, but deeper haematomas may mainly feel like a lump.

Less common causes

A hernia happens when tissue pushes through a weak area in the surrounding muscle. It can produce a lump in the groin or abdomen that becomes more noticeable when coughing, lifting, or standing.

Other possibilities include an enlarged thyroid gland in the neck, a swollen salivary gland, a breast cyst, or a noncancerous growth in muscle or other soft tissue.

Cancer can cause a lump, but most lumps are not cancer. Lumps that are growing, hard, difficult to move, or unexplained need medical assessment. A new breast or testicle lump should be checked even if it does not hurt.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if a lump or swelling comes with:

Seek same-day medical care if a lump is red, hot, increasingly painful, or accompanied by fever. These signs may indicate an infection that needs treatment.

A painful groin or abdominal lump that becomes firm, cannot be gently pushed back, or occurs with vomiting or severe abdominal pain also needs urgent assessment. This can happen when a hernia traps part of the bowel.

Book a routine appointment if a lump:

Arrange follow-up sooner if you also have unexplained weight loss, drenching night sweats, ongoing fever, or unusual tiredness.

- Trouble breathing or swallowing, especially with mouth, tongue, face, or neck swelling
- Sudden severe testicle pain or swelling
- A pulsing abdominal lump with sudden severe abdominal or back pain, weakness, or fainting
- Lasts longer than about two weeks
- Is growing or keeps returning
- Feels hard or does not move
- Causes ongoing pain
- Is in the breast, testicle, or neck
- Appears without a clear explanation

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when you noticed the lump, whether it has changed, and whether it is painful. They may ask about recent infections, injuries, medicines, and other symptoms.

During an examination, they may assess the lump's size, shape, texture, movement, warmth, and location. Nearby skin and lymph nodes may also be checked.

Sometimes an examination is enough to identify a likely cause. If more information is needed, tests may include an ultrasound scan, other imaging, or blood tests. Breast lumps may be assessed with ultrasound or a mammogram.

A small tissue sample, called a biopsy , may be taken if the cause remains unclear. Needing a biopsy does not mean that a lump is cancerous; it allows the cells to be examined directly.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the lump. A harmless cyst or lipoma may only need monitoring if it is not painful or growing. Some lumps can be removed if they cause discomfort, interfere with movement, or remain uncertain after assessment.

Bacterial infections may require antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline . An abscess, which is a pocket of pus, may need to be drained by a healthcare professional. Antibiotics do not treat lumps caused by viruses or noninfectious inflammation.

Avoid squeezing, cutting, or trying to drain a lump yourself. This can cause infection, bleeding, and scarring. Protect a tender area from pressure and friction.

If you need pain relief, a pharmacist can help you choose an option that is suitable for you. Do not repeatedly press the lump to check it, as this may make tenderness or swelling worse.

What to expect

Lumps caused by minor injuries or infections may improve over days or weeks. Swollen lymph nodes can take time to return to their usual size after an infection has cleared.

Cysts and lipomas may remain for years without causing problems. Other lumps may slowly change or require treatment. If a lump has been assessed but later grows, becomes painful, or develops new skin changes, arrange another review.

Common questions

Can you tell whether a lump is cancer by touching it?

No. Features such as rapid growth, firmness, or being fixed in place can lead to further testing, but touch alone cannot diagnose cancer. Many noncancerous lumps feel firm, and some cancers do not.

Should I measure a lump?

You can note its approximate size and when you first noticed it. A photograph may help track visible changes. Avoid frequent pressing, and seek medical assessment rather than relying only on home monitoring.

Is a painful lump more concerning than a painless one?

Pain often occurs with infection, inflammation, or injury. Some serious conditions can also be painful, while others are painless. The cause depends on the full pattern of symptoms, not pain

alone.

What if a lump disappears?

A lump that disappears may have been temporary swelling, such as an enlarged lymph node. Mention it at a routine appointment if it repeatedly returns, appears in the same place, or comes with other unexplained symptoms.

Sources

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