SYMPTOM

# Papule

A papule is a small, solid bump raised above the surrounding skin.

**WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**
A small, solid, raised bump, sometimes itchy or tender

**WHERE IT IS FELT**
Anywhere on the skin, often face, trunk, arms, or legs

**MOST COMMON CAUSES**
Acne, irritated hair follicles, insect bites

**WHEN IT IS URGENT**
Rapidly spreading redness, severe pain, fever, or pus

**USUALLY LASTS**
Days to weeks, depending on the cause

**SEE A DOCTOR IF**
Persists, recurs, changes, or does not heal

## Overview

A papule is a small, solid, raised area of skin. It is usually less than 1 centimetre across, although exact definitions differ slightly. "Papule" describes what a skin change looks like, not what caused it.

Papules can be skin-coloured, red, brown, purple, or another colour. You may have one bump or many. Some are smooth, while others feel rough or scaly.

Many everyday skin conditions can produce papules. Examples include acne, irritation around a hair follicle, insect bites, eczema, and warts. Less often, a papule is related to an infection, a medicine reaction, or another skin condition that needs medical assessment.

## What it may feel or look like

A papule feels solid rather than fluid-filled. It may be painless, itchy, sore, or sensitive when touched. Its surface can be flat, rounded, pointed, crusted, or rough.

Nearby skin may look normal or may be inflamed. Inflammation can cause redness on lighter skin. On darker skin, it may look purple, grey, deep brown, or simply darker than the

surrounding area.

Several other skin changes can resemble a papule:

A papule can change over time. For example, an inflamed acne papule may develop a white centre, and an irritated bump may form a crust after scratching.

- A pustule contains visible pus
- A blister , also called a vesicle, contains clear fluid
- A nodule is larger or extends deeper into the skin
- A wheal , such as a hive, is a temporary raised swelling

## Common causes

Acne often causes red or skin-coloured papules, especially on the face, chest, shoulders, or back. These develop when hair follicles become blocked and inflamed. Blackheads, whiteheads, or pustules may appear nearby.

Folliculitis is inflammation around a hair follicle. It can follow shaving, friction, sweating, or time in a hot tub. Infection can also cause it. The bumps may be itchy or tender and often centre on individual hairs.

Insect bites can cause sudden, itchy papules on exposed skin. Several bumps may appear in a line or cluster. Scratching can break the skin and allow infection to develop.

Contact dermatitis and eczema may produce itchy papules with dry, cracked, or scaly skin. Possible triggers include soaps, cosmetics, jewellery, plants, adhesives, or workplace materials.

Heat rash causes groups of small bumps when sweat becomes trapped in the skin. It is more likely in hot, humid conditions or beneath tight clothing.

Less common causes include warts, molluscum contagiosum, scabies, psoriasis, medicine reactions, and inflammatory skin disorders. A persistent papule can occasionally be a form of skin cancer, particularly if it grows, bleeds, crusts repeatedly, or does not heal. These features need assessment, but they do not automatically mean cancer.

## When to seek medical care

Book a routine appointment if a papule or group of papules:

Seek same-day medical advice if the skin becomes rapidly more painful, hot, swollen, or red, or if redness spreads away from the bump. Pus, red streaks, fever, or feeling generally unwell can

also suggest a skin infection needing prompt assessment. Redness may be less obvious on darker skin, so pay attention to warmth, swelling, tenderness, and skin colour changes.

Get urgent help if bumps appear near the eye with significant swelling, eye pain, or vision changes.

Call emergency services if a sudden rash or raised bumps occur with trouble breathing, faintness, wheezing, or swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat. These can be signs of a severe allergic reaction.

- Lasts for several weeks without improving
- Keeps returning or continues to spread
- Is very itchy, painful, or interfering with sleep
- Bleeds, forms repeated crusts, changes shape, or does not heal
- Appeared after starting a new medicine
- Is accompanied by unexplained hair, nail, or mouth changes

## How the cause is found

A clinician will usually examine the papule and the surrounding skin. Its colour, shape, surface, location, and pattern can provide useful clues.

You may be asked when it started, how it has changed, and whether it itches or hurts. Other useful details include new medicines, skin products, travel, insect exposure, illness, shaving, close contact with someone who has a rash, and similar symptoms in household members.

Tests are not always needed. When the cause is uncertain, a clinician may examine the spot with a magnifying device called a dermatoscope. A swab can check for infection if there is drainage. Skin scrapings may help identify mites or fungus. Occasionally, a small skin sample, called a biopsy, is removed under local anaesthetic and examined in a laboratory.

## Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Acne, eczema, infection, insect bites, and warts require different approaches, so a treatment that helps one type of papule may irritate another.

While the cause is unclear:

A pharmacist can advise whether a non-prescription product is suitable for a familiar minor problem, such as mild acne or an uncomplicated insect bite. Avoid applying several active

products at once, as this can cause irritation and make the appearance harder to assess.

Prescription treatment may include medicine for inflammation or infection. Some persistent bumps can be frozen, removed, or treated in another way after the cause has been identified.

- Wash gently and avoid scrubbing the bump
- Do not squeeze, cut, or pick it
- Avoid newly introduced cosmetics or fragranced products
- Use a cool compress for itching or mild swelling
- Reduce friction from tight clothing, shaving, or equipment
- Photograph it with a ruler nearby to track changes

## What to expect

A papule caused by minor irritation or an insect bite may settle within days. Acne and folliculitis papules can take longer and may recur. Warts and some inflammatory skin conditions can remain for months or longer.

As a papule heals, it may flatten before its colour returns to normal. A temporary darker or lighter mark is common after inflammation, especially in darker skin. Picking, squeezing, and deeper inflammation increase the chance of a lasting mark or scar.

Arrange follow-up if the bump does not behave as expected, returns after treatment, or develops new features. A clear photograph taken early can help show how it has changed.

## Common questions

Is a papule the same as a pimple?

Not always. Some pimples are papules, but many other conditions also cause papules. A pimple with visible pus is usually described as a pustule.

Can a papule be contagious?

The papule itself is not contagious. However, some causes, including warts, molluscum contagiosum, scabies, and certain infections, can spread between people.

Should I pop a papule?

No. A solid papule may not contain anything that can be drained. Squeezing can worsen inflammation, introduce infection, and increase the chance of scarring or skin colour changes.

Can one papule be skin cancer?

Most isolated papules are not cancer. However, a bump that grows, repeatedly bleeds, crusts, changes, or fails to heal should be examined. Its appearance alone may not reveal the cause.

## Sources

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