SYMPTOM

Protuberance

A protuberance is a noticeable bump, bulge, or raised area on the body.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A bump or bulge that may feel soft or firm

WHERE IT IS FELT
Skin, abdomen, joints, bones, or almost any body area

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Skin cysts, fatty lumps, minor injury swelling

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden severe pain, vomiting, or dark skin over the bulge

USUALLY LASTS
Days after injury; longer with cysts, fatty lumps, or hernias

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

Overview

A protuberance is an area that sticks out from the surrounding body surface. You might describe it as a bump, lump, swelling, ridge, or bulge. It can occur in the skin, under the skin, over a bone or joint, or in the abdomen or groin.

"Protuberance" describes an appearance rather than a specific medical condition. Its cause depends on where it is, how quickly it appeared, and whether it changes with movement, coughing, or pressure.

Many protuberances are caused by harmless changes such as a skin cyst, fatty lump, normal bone shape, or swelling after a minor injury. A new or changing area may still need an examination because appearance alone cannot confirm the cause.

What it may feel or look like

A protuberance may be barely noticeable or clearly raised. It can be round, smooth, uneven, or spread over a wider area. The skin over it may look normal or may be red, bruised, or stretched.

It may feel:

A groin or abdominal bulge may become more obvious when you cough, lift something, or stand. Swelling from an injury may appear with pain or bruising. A skin infection may produce warmth, redness, tenderness, or drainage.

Notice whether the area is growing and whether you have other symptoms. These details can help a healthcare professional decide what testing, if any, is needed.

- Soft, rubbery, firm, or hard
- Painful, tender, itchy, or painless
- Fixed in place or movable beneath the skin
- Present all the time or noticeable only when standing or straining

Common causes

Common causes include swelling after a bump, strain, or repeated pressure. The raised area may come from inflammation or a collection of fluid in the tissues.

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

A lipoma is a non-cancerous lump made of fat. It usually feels soft or rubbery and may move slightly when pressed. Lipomas often grow slowly.

Some protuberances are normal body structures, such as a prominent rib, joint, or area of bone. Changes related to posture, muscle development, or body weight can make these structures more noticeable.

Other possible causes include an enlarged lymph node during an infection, a fluid-filled sac near a joint, a scar, or a hernia. A hernia happens when tissue pushes through a weak area in the muscle wall, often causing a groin or abdominal bulge.

Less commonly, a protuberance may be caused by a bone growth, an inflammatory condition, or a tumour. Tumours can be non-cancerous or cancerous. A lump that is growing, hard, deep, or difficult to move should be assessed, but these features do not confirm a diagnosis.

When to seek medical care

Seek emergency care for an abdominal or groin bulge that becomes suddenly very painful, firm, or impossible to push back, especially with vomiting, a swollen abdomen, or difficulty passing stool or gas. Darkening or marked redness of the skin over the bulge is also an

emergency sign. These symptoms can occur when tissue is trapped in a hernia.

Call emergency services for a new pulsating abdominal swelling accompanied by severe pain, weakness, or fainting. Do not repeatedly press on it.

Arrange same-day medical care if the protuberance rapidly enlarges or becomes red, hot, and painful, particularly if you have a fever or feel unwell. These can be signs of an infection that may need treatment.

Book a routine appointment if the area:

A painless lump may still deserve an examination. Routine assessment does not mean that a serious cause is expected.

- Remains for more than two weeks
- Is growing, recurring, painful, hard, or fixed
- Interferes with movement, clothing, eating, or daily activities
- Is a new lump in the breast, neck, or testicle

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when you noticed the protuberance, whether it has changed, and whether there was an injury or recent infection. They may ask about pain, fever, weight changes, bowel symptoms, or similar lumps elsewhere.

During an examination, they may check its size, texture, movement, warmth, and depth. For an abdominal or groin bulge, you may be asked to stand, cough, or gently strain.

Many superficial lumps can be assessed by examination alone. An ultrasound can show whether an area is solid or filled with fluid. X-rays may help with bony changes, while CT or MRI scans provide more detail about deep or complex areas.

If the cause remains uncertain, a clinician may recommend a biopsy. This means taking cells or a small tissue sample for laboratory examination.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause rather than the appearance alone. A harmless, stable lump may only need observation. Cysts or lipomas may be removed if they are painful, repeatedly inflamed, growing, or bothersome.

An abscess, which is a pocket of infection, may need drainage. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or

doxycycline are used in some infections but are not appropriate for every swollen or red lump. Hernias may need monitoring or surgical repair depending on their location and symptoms.

For mild swelling after a minor injury, rest the area and apply a wrapped cold pack for short periods. Follow the label if using a non-prescription pain reliever, and ask a pharmacist if you are unsure whether it is suitable for you.

Do not squeeze, puncture, cut, or repeatedly massage an unexplained protuberance. Avoid forcing an abdominal or groin bulge back into place, especially if it is painful.

What to expect

Swelling from a minor injury often settles over days to a few weeks. An enlarged lymph node related to an infection may shrink as the infection improves.

Cysts, lipomas, bony prominences, and hernias may remain unless treated. Some stay unchanged for years, while others gradually enlarge. Taking a dated photograph or noting the approximate size can help you describe changes, but it should not replace an examination when the area is persistent or concerning.

Common questions

Is "protuberance" a diagnosis?

No. It is a general word for something that projects outward. The location and underlying cause are more important than the term itself.

Can I tell whether it is harmless by touching it?

Not reliably. Soft and movable lumps are often non-cancerous, but texture alone cannot identify a lump. Growth, depth, location, and other symptoms also matter.

Should I try to push a bulge back in?

Do not force it. If you have a previously diagnosed hernia, follow the instructions given by your healthcare professional. A painful or stuck bulge needs urgent assessment.

Could a protuberance be cancer?

Most lumps have another explanation. However, a lump that is enlarging, hard, deep, fixed, or persistent should be examined so that uncommon but important causes are not missed.

Sources

- National Health Service. "Lumps." NHS Conditions.
- Achar S, Yamanaka J, Oberstar J. "Soft Tissue Masses: Evaluation and Treatment." American Family Physician . 2022;105(6):602-612.
- American College of Radiology. "ACR Appropriateness Criteria: Soft-Tissue Masses." 2022 update.
- American College of Surgeons. "Adult Inguinal and Femoral Groin Hernia Repair." Patient Education.
- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia, U.S. National Library of Medicine. "Skin Lumps."