SYMPTOM

Scrotal swelling

Scrotal swelling is enlargement of the skin sac that holds the testicles.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A larger, heavier, or tighter-feeling scrotum

WHERE IT IS FELT
The skin sac around one or both testicles

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Hydrocele, varicocele, inguinal hernia

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden pain or swelling, especially with nausea or vomiting

USUALLY LASTS
Days to months, depending on the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
New swelling, a lump, or enlargement that persists

Overview

Scrotal swelling means that the scrotum, the skin sac holding the testicles, looks or feels enlarged. It may affect one side or both sides. The swelling may come from the skin, fluid around a testicle, enlarged veins, inflammation, or tissue extending down from the groin.

Some causes are mild and painless. Others need prompt treatment. Sudden swelling with pain is particularly important because it can be caused by twisting of a testicle, known as testicular torsion . This can interrupt the testicle's blood supply.

A new lump or persistent swelling should be examined even when it does not hurt. You cannot reliably identify the cause by appearance or touch alone.

What it may feel or look like

The scrotum may appear larger on one side or throughout. The change can develop suddenly or slowly.

You may notice:

Other symptoms depend on the cause. An infection may cause fever, pain when urinating,

frequent urination, or discharge from the penis. Torsion often causes sudden one-sided pain, sometimes with nausea or vomiting.

- Heaviness, pressure, or a dragging feeling
- A smooth, soft, firm, or fluid-filled swelling
- Enlarged or twisted-feeling veins
- Tenderness, warmth, or redness
- Pain in the testicle, groin, or lower abdomen
- A groin bulge that extends into the scrotum
- A lump on or near a testicle
- Swelling that changes with standing, coughing, or activity

Common causes

Common causes include a hydrocele, varicocele, infection, and inguinal hernia.

A hydrocele is fluid collected around a testicle. It often causes smooth, painless swelling. Hydroceles may occur in babies or develop later in life.

A varicocele is a group of enlarged veins, usually above the testicle. It may feel like a soft bundle of cords and can cause heaviness or an ache, especially after standing.

Epididymitis is inflammation of the epididymis, a coiled tube behind the testicle. It is often caused by an infection and usually leads to gradually increasing tenderness or swelling. Urinary symptoms or discharge may occur.

An inguinal hernia develops when tissue from the abdomen pushes through a weak area in the groin. It may form a bulge that becomes more noticeable when standing, coughing, or straining.

Less common causes include an epididymal cyst, injury, skin inflammation, or fluid retention affecting both sides. An epididymal cyst is a fluid-filled lump near, rather than inside, the testicle.

A hard lump within a testicle can sometimes be testicular cancer. It is often painless and is less common than benign causes, but it needs prompt medical assessment.

Urgent causes include testicular torsion, a trapped hernia, and severe infection. These cannot be safely ruled out at home. Torsion is most common in adolescents but can happen at any age.

When to seek medical care

Go to an emergency department now if you have:

Sudden pain that goes away still needs urgent assessment. A testicle can sometimes twist and untwist, causing temporary symptoms.

Seek same-day medical care for warm, red, or tender swelling, particularly if you also have fever, pain when urinating, urinary frequency, or penile discharge. Pain or swelling that continues after a minor injury also deserves same-day advice.

Book a routine appointment for painless swelling, a new lump, recurring heaviness, or a change that persists. A new hard area in a testicle should be assessed promptly rather than watched for several weeks.

- Sudden or severe pain in one testicle or the scrotum
- Rapid swelling with nausea, vomiting, or lower abdominal pain
- A testicle that appears higher or lies at an unusual angle
- A painful groin or scrotal bulge that does not settle
- Significant swelling or pain after a major injury
- Rapidly worsening redness, darkened skin, confusion, or severe illness

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling started, whether it is painful, and whether it changes with standing or activity. They may ask about injuries, urinary symptoms, sexual health, previous surgery, and similar episodes.

The examination may be done while you are standing and lying down. It usually includes the abdomen, groin, scrotal skin, testicles, and nearby structures.

An ultrasound may be used to show whether swelling contains fluid or solid tissue. Doppler ultrasound also checks blood flow. Urine, blood, or infection tests may be needed when inflammation or infection is possible.

If torsion is strongly suspected, urgent surgical assessment may take priority over further testing because treatment is time-sensitive.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause.

A small, painless hydrocele or cyst may only need monitoring. Surgery can be considered if it becomes large, uncomfortable, or difficult to examine. A troublesome varicocele may be treated with a procedure to close the enlarged veins.

Bacterial epididymitis is treated with antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline chosen for the likely infection. A hernia may need surgical repair. Testicular torsion requires emergency surgery to untwist and secure the testicle.

Until you have been assessed, supportive underwear may reduce pulling or heaviness. A cool pack wrapped in cloth can be held against the area for short periods. Do not place ice directly on the skin.

You may be able to use a non-prescription pain reliever according to its label. Ask a pharmacist if you take other medicines or have health conditions that could make a pain reliever unsuitable.

Do not squeeze, puncture, or try to drain the swelling. Do not force a painful groin bulge back into place.

What to expect

How long swelling lasts depends on its cause. Mild swelling after an injury may settle over days, while a hydrocele, cyst, or varicocele can remain for months or longer. Swelling from infection can take longer to disappear than the pain or fever.

Many causes do not harm the testicle. However, torsion, some infections, and certain varicoceles can affect testicular function or fertility. Early assessment helps identify people who need treatment or follow-up.

Return for medical advice if swelling grows, pain develops, symptoms return, or treatment is not helping as expected.

Common questions

Can scrotal swelling be painless?

Yes. Hydroceles, cysts, varicoceles, hernias, and some testicular lumps may not hurt. Painless swelling still needs assessment if it is new or persistent.

Is swelling on only one side normal?

Many causes affect just one side, but one-sided swelling does not reveal the cause. Sudden

one-sided pain or swelling needs emergency assessment.

Can I tell whether a lump is inside the testicle?

It can be difficult to tell. A clinician and, when needed, an ultrasound can show where the lump begins. Arrange an appointment for any new lump rather than relying on self-examination alone.

Will scrotal swelling affect fertility?

Often it does not. The effect depends on the cause, severity, and whether both testicles are involved. Ask about fertility if you have a varicocele, repeated infections, torsion, or ongoing testicular changes.

Sources

- American College of Radiology. ACR Appropriateness Criteria: Newly Diagnosed Palpable Scrotal Abnormality . 2022
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sexually Transmitted Infections Treatment Guidelines, 2021: Epididymitis . 2021
- Crawford P, Crop JA. "Evaluation of Scrotal Masses." American Family Physician . 2014;89(9):723-727
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. Inguinal Hernia
- NHS. Testicle lumps and swellings