SYMPTOM

Skin lumps

A skin lump is a bump or swelling on or just beneath the skin.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A bump that may feel soft, firm, tender, or movable

WHERE IT IS FELT
On or just beneath the skin anywhere

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Skin cysts, lipomas, swollen lymph nodes

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

USUALLY LASTS
Days to years, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Growing, hard, fixed, unexplained, or present beyond two weeks

Overview

A skin lump is a raised area or swelling on or just beneath your skin. It is a symptom or physical sign, not a diagnosis.

Lumps can develop anywhere on the body. Some appear suddenly because of irritation, injury, or infection. Others grow slowly over months or years. Many are harmless, including cysts and fatty lumps called lipomas. However, a lump that is growing or does not go away should be checked.

The lump's location, texture, colour, and rate of growth can help a healthcare professional work out its cause. Its appearance alone may not provide a definite answer.

What it may feel or look like

A skin lump may be smaller than a pea or large enough to notice easily. It might be:

Notice when the lump appeared and whether it is changing. It can also help to note any pain, redness, drainage, fever, recent injury, insect bite, vaccination, or illness.

Avoid repeatedly pressing the lump to test it. This can make an irritated or inflamed area more

painful.

- Soft, rubbery, firm, or hard
- Fixed in place or movable beneath the skin
- Painless, tender, itchy, or warm
- The same colour as your skin, or red, purple, or darker
- Smooth, rough, crusted, or open at the surface
- Filled with fluid, pus, blood, or thicker material

Common causes

Common causes include skin cysts, lipomas, inflamed hair follicles, and swollen lymph nodes.

An epidermoid or pilar cyst is a closed sac containing keratin, a material found in skin and hair. These cysts are often round and firm. They may move slightly and sometimes have a small opening in the centre. A cyst can become red and painful if inflamed or infected.

A lipoma is a non-cancerous growth of fat cells. It usually feels soft or rubbery, moves beneath the skin, and grows slowly.

A boil or skin abscess is a collection of pus caused by infection. It is often painful, warm, red, and swollen. An inflamed hair follicle may begin as a smaller tender bump.

Lymph nodes are small parts of the immune system. Those in the neck, armpits, or groin may swell while your body responds to an infection.

Other possible causes include insect bites, bruises, scar tissue, warts, benign skin growths, and inflammation around a joint or tendon. Repeated painful lumps in the armpits, groin, or beneath the breasts can occur with hidradenitis suppurativa, a long-term inflammatory skin condition.

Causes needing prompt assessment include a spreading skin infection or, less commonly, a cancer affecting the skin or deeper soft tissue. A painless lump can still need assessment if it keeps growing, feels hard or fixed, or does not resolve.

When to seek medical care

Arrange a routine appointment if a lump:

Seek same-day medical advice if the lump becomes very painful, hot, or red; releases pus; or is surrounded by redness that is spreading. Fever, chills, or feeling generally unwell may indicate an infection requiring prompt care. People with a weakened immune system or poorly

controlled diabetes should also seek early advice about a possible skin infection.

Call emergency services if swelling of your lips, tongue, face, or throat occurs with difficulty breathing, wheezing, faintness, or trouble swallowing. These can be signs of a severe allergic reaction.

- Lasts longer than two weeks without a clear explanation
- Is getting larger, hard, or difficult to move
- Returns after previous treatment
- Bleeds, forms a persistent sore, or changes in colour or shape
- Causes ongoing pain or limits movement
- Is a swollen lymph node that does not settle after an illness

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the lump appeared, whether it has changed, and whether you have pain or other symptoms. They may ask about recent infections, injuries, medicines, and any history of similar lumps.

During an examination, they may check the lump's size, depth, warmth, texture, and movement. Nearby skin and lymph nodes may also be examined.

Many lumps can be identified from the history and examination. If the cause remains uncertain, an ultrasound can show whether a lump is solid or fluid-filled and how deeply it extends. Other imaging may be needed for a deep or enlarging lump.

A biopsy involves removing some or all of the lump for examination under a microscope. This may be recommended when the diagnosis is unclear or the lump has concerning features.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the lump. Some harmless lumps can be monitored without treatment. A cyst or lipoma may be removed if it is painful, repeatedly inflamed, growing, or troublesome.

An abscess may need to be drained by a healthcare professional. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline are used for some bacterial infections, but they are not suitable for every inflamed lump.

Until the cause is clear:

A warm compress should not delay medical care when redness is spreading, pain is severe, or you have a fever.

- Do not squeeze, cut, or puncture the lump
- Keep any broken skin clean and covered
- Use a warm, clean compress for a tender boil-like bump
- Avoid sharing towels if the lump is draining
- Follow label directions if using non-prescription pain relief

What to expect

A bump caused by minor irritation, a bite, or an inflamed hair follicle may settle within days or weeks. Swollen lymph nodes often shrink after the related infection improves, although this can take time.

Cysts and lipomas may remain for years unless removed. They sometimes grow slowly or become uncomfortable. Treatment usually depends on symptoms, examination findings, and your preferences.

Monitor a persistent lump rather than relying on memory. A dated photograph or measurement can help show whether it is changing.

Common questions

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

No. Certain features, such as continued growth, firmness, or being fixed in place, can prompt further tests, but touch alone cannot confirm the cause. Many non-cancerous lumps also feel firm.

Should I squeeze a cyst or boil?

No. Squeezing can push inflammation deeper, spread infection, and cause scarring. A painful or infected lump may need safe drainage by a healthcare professional.

Why does a lump move beneath the skin?

Some lumps sit within soft tissue and move when pressed. Lipomas and some cysts often behave this way. Movement can provide a clue, but it does not establish a diagnosis.

What if the lump is painless?

Painless lumps are often harmless, but pain is not the only reason to arrange an assessment. Book an appointment if the lump is growing, hard, fixed, unexplained, or still present after two weeks.

Sources

- NHS: Lumps
- British Association of Dermatologists: Epidermoid and pilar cysts
- DermNet: Lipoma
- DermNet: Cutaneous abscess
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence: Suspected cancer-recognition and referral, NG12