CONDITION

Skin tags

Skin tags are small, harmless pieces of skin that hang from the body on a short stalk.

WHAT IT IS
Small benign skin growth on a narrow stalk

BODY SYSTEM
Skin

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Soft bump, narrow stalk, rubbing irritation, occasional bleeding

WHAT CAUSES IT
Unknown; friction and metabolic factors may contribute

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Skin examination; biopsy if the appearance is uncertain

MAIN TREATMENT
Reassurance or removal by a trained healthcare professional

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - individual tags can be removed

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
No - bleeding usually settles with firm pressure

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Benign; new skin tags may develop

Overview

Skin tags are small, soft growths that hang from the skin. They are also called acrochordons. They are benign, meaning they are not cancer.

A skin tag is often attached by a thin piece of tissue called a stalk. Tags may be skin-coloured, brown or darker than the surrounding skin. They can be smooth or slightly wrinkled and may range from a tiny bump to a larger, dangling growth.

Skin tags often appear where skin rubs against skin, clothing or jewellery. Common areas include the neck, armpits, groin, eyelids and skin folds. They may also develop beneath the breasts.

Most skin tags do not need treatment. Removal may be helpful if a tag catches on clothing, becomes repeatedly irritated, affects vision near an eyelid or bothers you because of how it

looks. It is important not to assume that every raised or hanging growth is a skin tag, especially if it has unusual features or is changing.

Symptoms

A typical skin tag is:

Skin tags usually grow slowly. You may have one or many.

A tag can become sore if it catches on a razor, necklace or clothing. It may bleed after being scratched or cut. If the stalk twists, its blood supply can be reduced. The tag may then become painful, swollen, dark red, purple or black. It may eventually dry up and fall off.

Skin tags are different from flat patches of discoloured skin. They can sometimes resemble warts, moles or other skin growths, so appearance alone may not always be enough to identify them at home.

- Soft and easy to move
- Attached to the skin by a narrow stalk
- Skin-coloured or slightly darker
- Painless unless rubbed, twisted or injured

Causes and risk factors

The exact cause of skin tags is not fully understood. Friction is thought to contribute because tags commonly develop in skin folds and other places that rub.

Skin tags become more common with age. They are also associated with pregnancy, having a larger body size and a family tendency to develop them. Hormonal and body changes during pregnancy may contribute to new tags.

People with insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes or metabolic syndrome may be more likely to have multiple skin tags. Insulin resistance means the body does not respond to insulin as well as it should. Metabolic syndrome is a group of health factors that includes high blood pressure, abnormal blood fats and raised blood sugar.

These associations do not mean that a skin tag proves you have diabetes or another medical condition. Most people do not need testing simply because they have one or two typical tags. A healthcare professional may discuss general health checks if you have many tags alongside other risk factors or symptoms.

Skin tags are not caused by poor hygiene. They are not contagious and cannot be passed to another person.

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional can usually identify a skin tag by examining it. Most typical tags do not require blood tests, scans or other investigations.

A closer examination may be needed if the growth is unusually firm, has no clear stalk, changes quickly, has several colours or does not look like a typical skin tag. A clinician may use a dermatoscope, a handheld magnifying device with a light, to inspect the surface.

If the diagnosis remains uncertain, the growth may be removed and examined under a microscope. This is called a biopsy. It can distinguish a skin tag from a wart, mole or less common skin tumour.

Tell the clinician if the growth has changed, bleeds without being rubbed, forms a sore that does not heal or is different from your other skin marks.

Treatment and management

Skin tags do not need treatment if they are comfortable and the diagnosis is clear. Creams and medicines are not needed to stop them from spreading because they are not an infection.

If removal is wanted, a trained healthcare professional may use one of several methods:

The best method is influenced by the tag's size, location and stalk. A local anaesthetic may be used to numb the skin, particularly for a larger tag or a sensitive area. Small tags can sometimes be removed without it.

Brief discomfort, minor bleeding, swelling or a small scab can follow treatment. Skin colour changes or a small scar are possible. Freezing may need more than one treatment, and tags close to an eyelid require particular care.

Do not cut, burn or tie off a suspected skin tag yourself. Home removal can lead to bleeding, infection, burns or scarring. It also risks treating a mole or another growth that needs assessment. Products sold online for removing skin tags may damage healthy skin and may not have been shown to be safe or effective.

Removal for appearance alone may be treated as a cosmetic procedure, so its cost may not be covered by a public health service or insurance plan.

- Snip removal: The tag is cut off with sterile surgical scissors or a blade
- Electrosurgery: An electrical current heats and removes the tissue
- Cryotherapy: Liquid nitrogen freezes the tag so it later falls off
- Ligation: The stalk is tied off to stop its blood supply

Complications

Skin tags themselves are harmless. A true skin tag does not turn into skin cancer.

The main problems come from repeated rubbing or accidental injury. A damaged tag may become painful, crusted or bleed. Infection is uncommon but can occur after injury or removal.

A more important risk is mistaking another type of growth for a skin tag. Skin cancers and other conditions do not usually look exactly like a typical soft, stalked tag, but any uncertain or changing growth deserves an examination.

Treatment can leave a small scar or an area that is lighter or darker than the surrounding skin. This is more noticeable in some skin tones.

Prevention

There is no reliable way to prevent all skin tags. Age, pregnancy, inherited tendency and other factors cannot be controlled.

Reducing repeated rubbing in skin folds may help with irritation, but it is not known to prevent every tag. Comfortable clothing and avoiding jewellery that repeatedly catches a tag can limit injury.

Maintaining a weight that is healthy for you may reduce skin-fold friction and supports general metabolic health. However, weight loss is not a guaranteed way to prevent or remove skin tags.

Living with it and what to expect

Skin tags may remain unchanged for years or slowly become larger. Some fall off after their stalk twists, while others stay in place unless removed.

Once a tag has been completely removed, that individual tag is usually gone. Another one can develop in the same general area, and new tags may appear elsewhere over time. Removal

does not prevent future tags.

Most people with skin tags live normally without treatment or monitoring. You do not need to cover them, avoid touching other people or change shared towels because tags are not contagious.

Check your skin from time to time so you know what is usual for you. Arrange a routine appointment if a growth changes or you are unsure whether it is a skin tag. This is especially useful for marks in places that are difficult to see.

When to get medical help

Arrange a routine appointment if:

Seek prompt medical advice after removal if the area becomes increasingly painful, hot or swollen, produces pus, or if redness is spreading. Fever with these symptoms may indicate an infection.

If a tag is accidentally cut, apply firm, continuous pressure with clean gauze or cloth. Avoid repeatedly lifting the cloth to check it. Seek urgent help if bleeding is heavy or does not stop despite sustained pressure, particularly if you take blood-thinning medicine or have a bleeding disorder.

Call emergency services for severe uncontrolled bleeding, fainting or difficulty breathing. These situations are not typical of an uncomplicated skin tag.

- You are not sure that a growth is a skin tag
- It changes noticeably in size, shape or colour
- It repeatedly catches, hurts or bleeds
- It develops a sore that does not heal
- You want to discuss safe removal
- Many tags appear and you also have concerns about blood sugar or metabolic health

Common questions

Are skin tags contagious?

No. Skin tags are not caused by a contagious infection, and they do not spread through skin contact, towels or sexual contact.

Warts can spread because they are caused by a virus, but warts tend to have a firmer, rougher

surface. A clinician can help if you cannot tell which type of growth you have.

Can a skin tag turn into cancer?

A true skin tag is benign and does not become cancer. However, some moles and skin tumours may be mistaken for skin tags.

Have a growth examined if it is firm, rapidly changing, unevenly coloured, bleeding without injury or forming a sore. These features do not automatically mean cancer, but they should not be treated at home.

Why am I suddenly getting lots of skin tags?

Tags may become more noticeable with age, weight changes, pregnancy or increased rubbing in skin folds. Multiple tags can also be associated with insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes, although tags alone do not diagnose either condition.

If many have appeared or you have symptoms such as unusual thirst or frequent urination, arrange a routine health assessment.

Can I remove a skin tag at home?

Home removal is not recommended. Cutting can cause bleeding or infection, while freezing chemicals, acids and burning products can injure healthy skin. A growth that looks like a tag may also be something else.

Professional assessment is particularly important for growths on an eyelid, genitals or another sensitive area.

Will skin tags grow back after removal?

A completely removed skin tag does not usually regrow from the same tissue. However, another tag can form nearby or elsewhere. People who develop one tag may continue to develop more over time.

Do skin tags mean I have diabetes?

Not by themselves. Skin tags are common and can occur in people without diabetes.

Having many tags is associated with insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes, particularly when other risk factors are present. A healthcare professional can advise whether routine blood sugar testing is appropriate based on your overall health.

Sources

- NHS. Skin tags



- DermNet. Skin tags
- American Academy of Dermatology. Skin tags: Why they develop, and how to remove them
- National Library of Medicine, StatPearls. Skin Tag (Acrochordon)
- American Family Physician. Cutaneous Cryosurgery for Common Skin Conditions
- US Food and Drug Administration. Products marketed for removing moles and other skin lesions can cause injuries and scarring