SYMPTOM

Lump in the abdomen

A lump in the abdomen is a bulge, swelling, or firm area in or under the belly.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A bulge, swelling, or firm area in your belly

WHERE IT IS FELT
The belly wall or deeper inside the abdomen

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Hernia, lipoma, constipation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Severe pain, vomiting, or a tender lump that will not flatten

USUALLY LASTS
Days to years, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
The lump is new, persistent, growing, hard, or unexplained

Overview

A lump in the abdomen is an area that looks raised or feels different from the surrounding belly. It may be in the abdominal wall, which includes the skin, fat, and muscles. Other lumps come from organs or tissues deeper inside the abdomen.

The lump may be soft or firm, painful or painless, and always present or only noticeable in certain positions. For example, a hernia may appear when you cough, lift, or stand, then become smaller when you lie down.

There are many possible causes. Some are minor, while others need medical assessment or urgent treatment. The lump's location and whether it changes, grows, or causes other symptoms can help narrow down the cause.

What it may feel or look like

You may notice:

A hernia often feels like a bulge near the groin, navel, or an old surgical scar. A lipoma, which is a non-cancerous lump made of fat cells, is usually soft and can move slightly under the skin.

A lump deeper in the abdomen may be harder to define. You might notice fullness, pressure, bloating, or a difference between the two sides of your belly instead of a clear bump.

- A soft, movable lump under the skin
- A bulge that appears when coughing, straining, or standing
- A firm area that does not move
- A broad ridge along the middle of the belly
- Swelling with tenderness, redness, or warmth
- A pulsing feeling in the abdomen

Common causes

Hernias develop when tissue pushes through a weak area in the abdominal muscles. They often become more obvious with coughing, lifting, or straining. Some flatten when you lie down or press very gently around them.

Lipomas are soft fatty lumps that grow beneath the skin. They usually grow slowly and are not painful, although they can become uncomfortable if they press on nearby tissue.

Constipation can sometimes cause a firm or full feeling, particularly in the lower abdomen. Other symptoms may include hard stools, difficulty passing stool, or having bowel movements less often than usual.

Muscle separation , called diastasis recti, can produce a ridge down the middle of the abdomen. It may be noticeable when sitting up or tightening the belly muscles. It can occur after pregnancy or changes in body weight and is not the same as a hernia.

Less common causes include a cyst, an enlarged organ, a collection of infected fluid called an abscess, or a growth arising from the bowel, ovaries, uterus, kidneys, or other tissues. A lump does not by itself show whether a growth is cancerous.

A painful hernia can occasionally trap part of the bowel. A pulsing lump may rarely be related to widening of the body's main artery, called an abdominal aortic aneurysm. These possibilities require prompt assessment when accompanied by warning symptoms.

When to seek medical care

Arrange a routine appointment if the lump is new and unexplained, remains present, or keeps returning. It should also be checked if it is growing, hard, fixed in place, or accompanied by

ongoing pain, appetite loss, unexplained weight loss, or changes in bowel or bladder habits.

Seek same-day urgent medical care if:

Call emergency services for sudden severe abdominal or back pain, especially with fainting, marked weakness, clammy skin, breathing difficulty, or a pulsing abdominal lump. Do not drive yourself if you feel faint or seriously unwell.

- The lump becomes painful, tender, firm, or red
- A suspected hernia no longer flattens when you lie down
- You have fever, vomiting, or increasing abdominal swelling
- You cannot pass stool or gas
- Pain is persistent or getting worse

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when you first noticed the lump, whether it changes with movement or meals, and whether you have pain, vomiting, constipation, fever, weight loss, or urinary symptoms.

They may examine you while you are lying down and standing. You may be asked to cough or tighten your abdominal muscles. This can show whether the lump moves, pulses, or becomes more obvious with pressure inside the abdomen.

An ultrasound can help distinguish a solid lump from a fluid-filled cyst and may show a hernia. A CT or MRI scan may be used when the lump is deep, unclear, or needs more detailed assessment.

Blood tests may look for infection, inflammation, anaemia, or problems involving abdominal organs. A pregnancy test or other tests may be offered when relevant. If a growth remains unexplained, a small tissue sample, called a biopsy, may sometimes be needed.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the lump and whether it is producing symptoms.

A painless lipoma may only need monitoring. Removal may be considered if it grows, becomes painful, or the diagnosis is uncertain. Hernias may be monitored or repaired with surgery, depending on their location, symptoms, and risk of complications.

If constipation appears to be contributing, regular movement, enough fluids, and a gradual

increase in fibre may help. Do not treat presumed constipation at home if you have severe pain, vomiting, marked swelling, or cannot pass gas or stool.

Avoid repeatedly pressing, massaging, or trying to force an unexplained lump back into place. Until it has been assessed, it may help to avoid activities that clearly make the bulge painful, including heavy lifting or straining.

Infections, cysts, enlarged organs, and other growths need treatment directed at their specific cause.

What to expect

Some lumps, such as hernias and lipomas, can remain for months or years unless treated. A lump related to constipation may improve after bowel movements return to normal. Other causes may change over days or weeks.

Keep track of where the lump is, when it appears, and whether it is changing. A photograph taken while the lump is visible can be useful if it disappears before your appointment.

Follow-up may involve watching for changes, reviewing scan results, or discussing treatment. Seek earlier care if the lump becomes painful, rapidly enlarges, or is accompanied by vomiting, fever, fainting, or inability to pass stool or gas.

Common questions

Can coughing or lifting cause an abdominal lump?

These activities can make an existing hernia more noticeable by increasing pressure inside the abdomen. A bulge that repeatedly appears with coughing or lifting should be assessed.

Does a painless lump need checking?

Yes, if it is new, unexplained, growing, or persistent. Pain is not the only reason a lump may need evaluation.

Can bloating feel like a lump?

Bloating usually causes more general swelling or tightness rather than one defined lump. Constipation or gas can sometimes create uneven fullness, but a distinct or persistent area should not be assumed to be bloating.

Should I press the lump to see whether it disappears?

You can notice whether it changes naturally when you lie down, stand, or cough. Do not press

hard or repeatedly try to force it inward, especially if it is painful or tender.

Sources

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