SYMPTOM

Skin nodules

Skin nodules are noticeable solid lumps within or just beneath the skin.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A firm or soft lump in or under your skin

WHERE IT IS FELT
Anywhere on the skin or just beneath it

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Skin cysts, lipomas, inflamed hair follicles

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Rapidly spreading redness with fever or feeling very unwell

USUALLY LASTS
Days to years, based on inflammation and the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
A lump is new, growing, painful, hard, fixed, or persistent

Overview

A skin nodule is a solid or partly solid lump that forms within the skin or in the tissue just beneath it. In medical language, a nodule is usually deeper and larger than a small raised spot called a papule. In everyday use, people may call it a lump, bump, knot, or cyst.

Nodules can develop anywhere on the body. They may be soft or firm, movable or fixed, and painless or tender. Some appear suddenly because of inflammation or infection. Others grow slowly over months or years.

A skin nodule is a symptom or physical finding, not one diagnosis. Many have noncancerous causes, such as cysts and fatty lumps. However, a new or changing nodule sometimes needs an examination to identify the cause.

What it may feel or look like

A nodule may be the same colour as your skin or appear red, brown, purple, black, or yellow. The skin over it may be smooth, rough, crusted, or broken.

Features that can help identify the cause include:

An inflamed nodule may become swollen, warm, and tender. A cyst may have a small central opening and occasionally release thick material. A lipoma, which is a noncancerous fatty lump, often feels soft and moves slightly under the skin.

You cannot reliably tell what a nodule is by touch or appearance alone.

- Whether it is soft, rubbery, firm, or hard
- Whether it moves when gently pressed
- Whether it is painful, warm, itchy, or draining fluid
- How quickly it appeared or changed
- Whether there is one nodule or several
- Whether it sits in the skin or deeper underneath it

Common causes

Skin cysts are enclosed sacs beneath the skin. Epidermoid cysts, often simply called skin cysts, contain skin protein rather than fluid. They commonly occur on the face, neck, chest, or back. They may remain unchanged for years or become sore if inflamed.

Lipomas are soft lumps made of fat cells. They usually grow slowly and are often painless. They commonly occur on the shoulders, back, arms, thighs, or neck.

Inflamed hair follicles and boils can form painful red nodules. A boil is a deeper infection around a hair follicle and may fill with pus. Several connected boils can form a larger infected area.

Insect bites, acne, and local reactions may also produce temporary nodules. A reaction can occur after an injection, injury, piercing, or contact with an irritating substance.

Less common causes include dermatofibromas, which are small firm skin growths; inflammatory conditions such as erythema nodosum, which often causes tender red nodules on the shins; and deposits related to conditions such as gout or rheumatoid arthritis. Enlarged lymph nodes can also feel like nodules beneath the skin, especially in the neck, armpit, or groin.

Less often, a persistent or changing nodule is a skin cancer or a tumour in deeper soft tissue. Features such as rapid growth, bleeding, an open sore, unusual pigmentation, or fixation to deeper tissue need medical assessment, but they do not prove that cancer is present.

When to seek medical care

Seek same-day medical care if a nodule becomes very painful, hot, or swollen, especially if

redness is spreading or you have a fever. Pus, red streaks, or swelling near an eye also need prompt attention. These signs can occur with an abscess or spreading skin infection.

Get emergency help if a skin infection is accompanied by confusion, severe weakness, difficulty breathing, fainting, or blue, grey, very pale, or blotchy skin. These symptoms may signal a serious body-wide response to infection.

Book a routine appointment if a nodule:

Arrange an earlier review if you have a weakened immune system, poor circulation, or diabetes and develop a painful or inflamed lump. These conditions can make infections harder to control.

- Lasts longer than a few weeks without a known cause
- Is getting larger or repeatedly returns
- Feels hard, deep, or fixed in place
- Bleeds, forms an ulcer, or changes colour
- Causes ongoing pain or affects movement
- Appears with unexplained weight loss or night sweats

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the nodule appeared, whether it has changed, and whether it causes pain, itching, bleeding, or drainage. They may also ask about injuries, bites, medicines, recent infections, and other symptoms.

During the examination, they will check the nodule's size, colour, depth, warmth, texture, and movement. They may examine nearby lymph nodes or look for similar nodules elsewhere.

Some nodules can be identified from their typical appearance and feel. If the cause is uncertain, an ultrasound can show whether a lump contains fluid or solid tissue and how deep it extends. A sample of fluid may be tested when infection is suspected.

A biopsy removes part or all of the nodule for examination under a microscope. This may be recommended for a persistent, unusual, pigmented, or growing nodule. Deeper lumps may require additional imaging.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and whether the nodule is painful, infected, growing, or

otherwise troublesome.

A harmless cyst or lipoma may not need treatment. If it causes symptoms, a clinician may discuss removal. Simply draining a cyst does not always remove its lining, so it can return.

For a small boil, a warm, clean compress may ease discomfort and encourage natural drainage. Do not squeeze, puncture, cut, or try to drain a nodule yourself. This can spread infection, cause bleeding, and make diagnosis more difficult.

Keep a draining area clean and covered with a fresh dressing. Wash your hands after touching it, and do not share towels or razors. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline are useful for some bacterial infections but do not treat every red or painful nodule. An abscess may need drainage by a trained professional.

Avoid applying wart removers, acids, or strong skin products unless the nodule's cause is known. These products can burn healthy skin or delay proper assessment.

What to expect

How long a nodule lasts depends on its cause. An inflamed follicle or insect reaction may settle over days or weeks. Cysts and lipomas may remain for years. Inflammatory nodules can improve as the underlying trigger is treated.

Some nodules disappear without leaving a mark. Others may leave darker skin or a scar, particularly after inflammation, drainage, or surgery. Cysts and boils can return.

If monitoring is recommended, note the nodule's location and size. A dated photograph beside a ruler can help show change. Seek another assessment if it grows, becomes painful, changes colour, or develops bleeding or drainage.

Common questions

Does a skin nodule mean cancer?

No. Many skin nodules are caused by cysts, fatty tissue, blocked follicles, or inflammation. Because appearance alone is not always enough to identify the cause, a persistent or changing nodule should be checked.

Should I try to pop it?

No. Squeezing or piercing a nodule can introduce bacteria, push infection deeper, and cause scarring. It may also make later examination more difficult.

Can nodules appear in groups?

Yes. Acne, follicle infections, insect reactions, and inflammatory conditions can cause several nodules. A cluster that is painful, rapidly spreading, or associated with fever needs prompt care.

Is a painless nodule safe to ignore?

Not always. Many harmless nodules are painless, but some conditions needing treatment are also painless. Arrange an appointment if the lump is new, growing, hard, fixed, or still present after a few weeks.

Sources

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