SYMPTOM

Swelling

Swelling is an increase in size caused by fluid, inflammation, or tissue changes

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Puffiness, tightness, or heaviness under the skin

WHERE IT IS FELT
Feet, ankles, legs, hands, face, or one local area

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Prolonged standing, minor injury, vein problems

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden one-sided leg swelling, especially with pain or redness

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to weeks, based on injury, fluid buildup, or illness

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It persists, recurs, worsens, or has no clear cause

Overview

Swelling means that part of your body has become larger than usual. It may happen when fluid collects in the tissues, which is called edema . Swelling can also result from inflammation, bleeding under the skin, infection, or tissue growth.

It may affect one small area, such as a swollen finger after an injury. It can also involve both ankles, a whole limb, the face, or several parts of the body.

Swelling is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Its meaning depends on where it is, how quickly it began, and what other symptoms you have. Mild swelling after standing for a long time often settles with movement and elevation. Sudden, painful, or rapidly spreading swelling needs more prompt assessment.

What it may feel or look like

The affected area may look puffy, stretched, or larger than the other side. Skin can appear shiny or feel tight. Shoes, socks, rings, or clothing may leave deeper marks or become difficult to put on.

Fluid-related swelling is sometimes pitting . This means that pressing the skin with a finger leaves a temporary dent. Other swelling feels firm and does not leave a dent.

You may also notice:

Swelling from an injury is often limited to the damaged area. Fluid-related swelling commonly affects the feet, ankles, or lower legs because gravity draws fluid downward.

- Heaviness, aching, stiffness, or reduced movement
- Warmth, redness, tenderness, or bruising
- Swelling that worsens later in the day
- Skin that feels thicker or leaks clear fluid
- A rapid increase in body weight when fluid builds up widely

Common causes

Common causes include sitting or standing for long periods, warm weather, eating a large amount of salt, pregnancy, and minor injuries such as sprains or insect bites. Leg veins that do not move blood upward efficiently can cause ankle swelling that worsens during the day.

Some medicines can cause swelling. Examples include certain blood pressure medicines, anti-inflammatory pain medicines, steroid medicines, hormones, and some medicines for nerve pain. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without medical advice.

Less common causes include problems involving the heart, kidneys, liver, or thyroid. These conditions can change how the body manages fluid. Low protein levels and poor nutrition can also contribute.

Damage or blockage in the lymphatic system may cause lymphedema . The lymphatic system helps drain extra fluid from tissues. Lymphedema can develop after surgery, radiation treatment, infection, or damage to lymph vessels.

Urgent causes include a blood clot in a deep vein, usually in one leg, and a bacterial skin infection called cellulitis. Sudden swelling of the lips, tongue, face, or throat can be caused by a serious allergic reaction. Swelling with severe breathing difficulty can also happen when fluid affects the lungs.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if swelling occurs with:

Seek same-day medical care for sudden swelling in one leg or arm, especially if it is painful, warm, or red. These features can occur with a blood clot or infection and should not be managed at home without assessment.

You should also seek prompt care if swelling is rapidly spreading, follows a serious injury, or occurs with fever, severe pain, confusion, very little urine, or skin that is becoming dark or blistered.

During pregnancy, seek urgent maternity advice for sudden swelling of the face or hands, particularly with a severe headache, vision changes, pain below the ribs, nausea, or feeling very unwell.

Book a routine appointment if swelling keeps returning, lasts more than a few days without a clear reason, gradually worsens, or affects your daily activities. Arrange follow-up if you develop persistent skin changes or swelling after starting a medicine.

- Trouble breathing, severe chest pain, fainting, or coughing up blood
- Sudden swelling of the tongue, lips, mouth, or throat
- Difficulty swallowing, noisy breathing, or a feeling that the throat is closing

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling began, whether it changes during the day, and whether it affects one side or both. They may ask about injuries, recent travel, pregnancy, medicines, previous surgery, and heart, kidney, liver, or vein conditions.

During an examination, they may compare both sides, press the skin to check for pitting, and look for warmth, redness, wounds, or changes in circulation. They may also listen to your heart and lungs.

Tests are chosen according to your symptoms. Blood tests may check kidney, liver, thyroid, and protein levels. A urine test can look for protein loss or kidney problems. An ultrasound may be used if a blood clot or vein problem is suspected. Heart tests or other imaging may be needed when swelling is widespread or occurs with breathing symptoms.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the swelling. An injury may need protection and gentle rehabilitation. An infection may need antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline . A blood clot, heart condition, kidney problem, or lymphatic disorder requires cause-specific care.

Medicines that increase urine output are sometimes called water tablets like furosemide or hydrochlorothiazide or diuretics. They are useful for certain medical causes of fluid buildup but are not suitable for every type of swelling. Do not take someone else's diuretic or start an over-the-counter product to remove fluid.

For mild swelling with an obvious, non-urgent cause, you can:

Compression socks can help some vein-related swelling, but they are not right for every circulation problem. Ask a healthcare professional before using them if swelling is sudden, unexplained, painful, or limited to one side.

- Raise the affected limb when resting
- Change position regularly and take gentle walks
- Move your ankles and feet during prolonged sitting
- Avoid tight socks, shoes, rings, or clothing
- Protect swollen skin with gentle washing and moisturizer
- Reduce heavily salted processed foods if salt worsens swelling

What to expect

Swelling after prolonged standing or a minor injury may improve over hours or days. Swelling related to vein or lymphatic problems may last longer and need ongoing measures such as movement, elevation, skin care, or professionally fitted compression.

The pattern matters as much as the duration. Note whether swelling is worse in the morning or evening, whether it improves when raised, and whether your weight or breathing has changed. Taking a photograph or recording when symptoms occur can help at an appointment.

Persistent swelling can stretch and irritate the skin. Seek follow-up if the skin becomes hard, cracked, discolored, repeatedly infected, or starts leaking fluid.

Common questions

Is swelling always caused by fluid?

No. Fluid buildup is common, but inflammation, bleeding, infection, enlarged tissue, or a lump can also make an area swell.

Why do my ankles swell by evening?

Gravity and reduced movement can allow fluid to collect in the lower legs. Vein problems,

medicines, pregnancy, and some medical conditions can contribute.

Should I drink less water?

Not unless a healthcare professional has advised a fluid limit for a specific condition. Drinking too little can cause dehydration and will not treat many causes of swelling.

Can swelling be different on each side?

Yes. Injury, infection, vein blockage, or lymphatic damage may affect one side. New one-sided limb swelling needs same-day assessment when it is sudden, painful, warm, or red.

Does pressing a dent into the skin identify the cause?

No. Pitting suggests fluid in the tissues, but it does not show why the fluid is there. The location, timing, other symptoms, examination, and sometimes tests are needed.

Sources

- NHS. Oedema
- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia. Swelling
- American Family Physician. Peripheral Edema: Evaluation and Management in Primary Care. 2022;106(5):557-564
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About Venous Thromboembolism
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Preeclampsia and High Blood Pressure During Pregnancy