SYMPTOM

Swollen abdomen

A swollen abdomen is a belly that feels enlarged, tight, or visibly bigger than usual.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A belly that feels tight, full, or looks larger

WHERE IT IS FELT
Between the ribs and pelvis

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Trapped gas, constipation, food-related bloating

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Severe pain, repeated vomiting, fever, or breathing difficulty

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to days, but ongoing causes can persist

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It does not settle, keeps returning, or steadily enlarges

Overview

A swollen abdomen means your belly looks or feels larger than usual. It may happen suddenly or develop gradually. The swelling may affect your whole abdomen or be more noticeable in one area.

Swelling is sometimes called abdominal distension . This is slightly different from bloating. Bloating is the feeling of pressure or fullness, while distension is a visible increase in abdominal size. You can have either one or both.

Many episodes are related to gas, constipation, or eating. However, ongoing or rapidly increasing swelling can have other causes. The symptoms that come with it help determine how quickly you need medical care.

What it may feel or look like

Your abdomen may feel full, stretched, firm, or uncomfortable. Clothing may feel tighter around your waist. The swelling may change during the day or become more noticeable after meals.

Other symptoms can include:

Notice whether the swelling improves after passing stool or gas. Also note whether it is constant, painful, one-sided, or accompanied by weight change, fever, vomiting, or changes in your periods.

- Passing more gas or burping
- Cramping or rumbling
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Feeling full after eating a small amount
- Nausea or reduced appetite

Common causes

Gas and food-related bloating are common causes. Gas can build up when bacteria in the bowel break down certain carbohydrates. Eating quickly, drinking fizzy drinks, chewing gum, or swallowing air may add to it. Some people notice symptoms after particular foods, but triggers differ.

Constipation can make the abdomen look and feel swollen. You may pass stool less often than usual, strain, or feel that you have not fully emptied your bowel.

Hormonal changes around a menstrual period can cause temporary bloating and fluid retention. Pregnancy also causes gradual abdominal enlargement. If pregnancy is possible, a home pregnancy test may help clarify the cause.

Other possible causes include weight gain, food intolerances, irritable bowel syndrome, and side effects from some medicines.

Less common causes include a hernia, an enlarged organ, an ovarian or uterine condition, or ascites . Ascites is a buildup of fluid inside the abdomen, often linked to liver, heart, or kidney disease.

A blocked bowel can cause swelling with cramping pain, vomiting, and difficulty passing stool or gas. This needs urgent assessment.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if the swelling comes with:

Seek same-day medical care if you have repeated vomiting, fever, new jaundice, or cannot

pass stool or gas. Jaundice means yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes.

You should also seek prompt advice if the swelling develops quickly, is painful, or occurs with a tender lump that cannot be gently pushed back.

Book a routine appointment if the swelling does not settle, keeps returning, or steadily increases. Arrange a review if it comes with unexplained weight loss, reduced appetite, ongoing bowel changes, pelvic symptoms, or feeling full unusually quickly.

- Severe or rapidly worsening abdominal pain
- Difficulty breathing, fainting, confusion, or marked weakness
- Vomiting blood or passing black or bloody stool
- A rigid, very tender abdomen
- Collapse or severe pain during a possible pregnancy

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling began, whether it changes after eating or bowel movements, and what other symptoms you have. They may ask about medicines, alcohol use, periods, pregnancy possibility, previous surgery, and medical conditions.

They may examine your abdomen for tenderness, gas, fluid, a lump, or an enlarged organ. Depending on your symptoms, tests may include blood tests, urine or stool tests, or a pregnancy test.

An ultrasound, X-ray, or CT scan may sometimes be needed. These tests can look for excess fluid, bowel blockage, organ changes, or a growth. Not everyone with abdominal swelling needs imaging.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Short-lived bloating or gas may improve with smaller meals, slower eating, and regular gentle movement. Limiting fizzy drinks and avoiding a food that repeatedly triggers symptoms may also help.

For constipation, drinking enough fluid and gradually adding fibre may be useful. Increasing fibre too quickly can worsen gas. Do not try to manage suspected constipation at home if you have severe pain, repeated vomiting, or cannot pass gas.

A pharmacist can advise whether a non-prescription treatment for gas or constipation may be

suitable for you. Avoid starting water tablets, laxatives, or restrictive diets for persistent swelling without advice. Water tablets used for fluid buildup require medical monitoring.

If a medicine may be contributing, do not stop it on your own. Ask the prescriber or a pharmacist to review it.

What to expect

Swelling caused by a meal, gas, or mild constipation often improves within hours or days. It may come and go with food, bowel habits, or menstrual cycles.

Persistent swelling is more likely to improve when its underlying cause is identified and treated. Keep a brief record of meals, bowel movements, periods, medicines, and associated symptoms. This can help at an appointment, but it should not delay urgent care when warning signs are present.

Common questions

Is a swollen abdomen the same as weight gain?

Not always. Weight gain usually develops gradually and affects more than how the abdomen feels after meals. Gas, stool, fluid, pregnancy, and other conditions can also increase abdominal size.

Can stress make my abdomen swell?

Stress can change how the gut moves and how strongly you notice pressure. It may worsen bloating in conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome, but new or persistent visible swelling still deserves attention.

Should I remove foods from my diet?

Avoiding a clear, repeatable trigger may help. Broad elimination diets can lead to missing nutrients and may hide the pattern of symptoms. Seek professional advice before making major long-term restrictions.

What if the swelling is only on one side?

One-sided swelling can come from the abdominal wall, a hernia, an organ, or another local cause. Arrange an examination, especially if there is a new lump, pain, or steady enlargement.

Sources

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