

Skin Cysts

Skin cysts are growths that can occur anywhere on the skin. They are typically not dangerous and do not lead to cancer. They can feel like small peas or beans just beneath the surface of the skin and may either be painful or painless. They are generally smooth and roll under the skin when pressed. Many skin cysts go away on their own and do not require medical treatment.

Prevention

You can prevent some skin cysts by keeping your skin clean. Wash with lukewarm water and use a mild soap or cleanser. Do not use skin care products that contain oil because they may clog your pores. Prevent skin irritation by wearing soft, cotton clothing. Adjust your clothing so that belts and straps or elastic from bras or underwear do not rub against your skin.

Epidermal Cyst

A common kind of skin cyst is called an epidermal or sebaceous cyst. If the cyst does not cause symptoms, you don't need to get treatment. If it does get inflamed, you may need minor surgery to remove it, but it is not dangerous.

Pilonidal Cyst

A tender lump that develops over the upper tailbone is called a "pilonidal cyst." This is also a common type of cyst. It is caused by an infection, which enters through tiny holes in the skin between the buttocks. Although it's not dangerous, it may form a painful abscess, or boil, which usually requires a minor surgical operation.

Ganglion Cyst

Some people get a smooth, sometimes painful nodule (a small, hard lump) at the wrist that may change size over a period of weeks. This is called a "ganglion cyst." It is not dangerous and sometimes goes away by itself within a few months. If it does become a problem, however, it can often be cured by piercing the cyst with a needle or by injecting a cortisone medication. Do not try this at home as it may lead to an infection. Sometimes a minor operation is needed, especially if the cyst does not respond to other treatments. Most of the time, a ganglion cyst will return if it is not surgically removed. Talk to your doctor about your options for treatment.

Lipoma

Another common lump under the skin is called a "lipoma," which means "lump of fat." This is a localized fatty lump that seems to grow by itself. It's soft, seldom hurts, and is usually discovered accidentally. Some people develop dozens of these. They usually grow very slowly over a period of years. Contact your doctor if they turn hard, suddenly get larger, become infected, or hurt. Your doctor may remove them for diagnosis.

Home Treatment

There are a few things you can do at home to care for your skin cyst. Avoid irritating the area. Adjust your clothing to avoid rubbing the cyst. Do not squeeze, scratch or pick at the cyst. Do not stick a needle in it. This may cause the cyst to become infected or inflamed. Keep the area clean and dry. Wash the area with a mild soap and warm water, but don't scrub because this can cause more irritation.

If the cyst shows signs of inflammation, such as redness or swelling, wash with an antibacterial soap once or twice a day. Don't put a bandage on the area, unless it becomes dirty or irritated. If this happens, apply an antibiotic ointment, such as bacitracin, and cover with a bandage. Change the bandage daily and watch for signs of infection such as increased pain, swelling, redness, fever, or chills.

Other Concerns

There are hundreds of other less common but harmless small lumps that can develop under the skin. Occasionally, a cancer can develop in this way. Women should be particularly aware of lumps that develop in their breasts, which should be checked for cancer. And men—especially men younger than age 34—should regularly examine their testicles and the surrounding area for lumps that might indicate testicular cancer.

When To Call Kaiser Permanente

Although most skin cysts do not need to be treated, you should see your doctor or other health care professional if:

1. You have any unexplained lump that doesn't shrink or go away.
2. Any mysterious lump is causing discomfort.
3. A cyst turns hard, grows rapidly, becomes repeatedly inflamed, or hurts.

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Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.