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Skin Tags: Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment Options

Extra pieces of skin that stick out beyond the surface of the body are very common, and they seem to show up out of nowhere. Learn what they look like, what causes them, and your options for treatment.

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Skin tags are common and totally harmless, but it's important to see a dermatologist if something is growing or changing on your skin. Alamy

Skin tags are extra pieces of skin that stick out beyond the surface of the body. They are harmless and more of a cosmetic issue than anything else, but understanding what they are, and aren't, can be reassuring. And though what causes skin tags isn't always known, skin tag treatment is pretty straightforward — they are easily removed.

How to Identify a Skin Tag: What They Look Like

Skin tags can be as small as 1 millimeter and as large as 1 centimeter, occasionally even larger, says Rebecca Baxt, MD, a dermatologist in Paramus, New Jersey. Skin tags, also called acrochordons, are mostly flesh-colored growths, although some may be darker in color, according to the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology (AOCD). They can be right on the skin's surface or seem to sprout from a thin stalk of skin and hang off the body.

They are common on the neck, under the arms, in the groin, and on the eyelids, says Dr. Baxt, as they tend to grow in parts of the body with folds, but they can appear elsewhere as well. Once formed, they typically don't get any bigger. You may have just one or two, or you may have many; they might be in isolated spots or in a group with many skin tags. They are usually asymptomatic, and they are

diagnosed by visual inspection. However, since it can be difficult to self-diagnose skin tags, it's important to see a dermatologist if anything is growing, changing, bleeding, itchy, crusty, flaky, or changing color on your skin, says Baxt.

A Common Condition: Skin Tag Causes and Risk Factors

Skin tags are very common. It is estimated that almost half of adults have at least one skin tag, according to the AOCD. They are common as people age, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP).

No one knows what causes skin tags, but they are more common with pregnancy and weight gain, says Baxt. There is no way to prevent skin tags other than staying a normal weight, she adds. They are also more common among people with diabetes and a family history of skin tags, according to the AOCD. One theory is that the friction created by skin rubbing against skin, a side effect of being overweight, causes skin tags in certain people, which would explain why skin tags often grow in body folds, according to the AOCD.

In rare cases, skin tags could be a symptom of nevoid basal cell carcinoma syndrome (NBCCS), which is a complex genetic disorder in which individuals are predisposed to developing a type of skin cancer known as basal cell carcinoma, according to the National Organization for Rare Disorders. Skin-tag-like basal cell carcinoma in childhood may represent a marker for NBCCS, according to one study.

Skin Tag Treatment Options: Simple Surgical Procedures

Sometimes skin tags fall off on their own as they get pulled and irritated, according to the AAFP. The only way to get rid of skin tags is to have a dermatologist remove them with a minor surgical procedure, says Baxt.

Depending on where your skin tags are located, you might not choose any skin tag treatment — out of sight can lead to out of mind. However, you might want to seek skin tag treatment for cosmetic reasons if, for instance, you have one on an eyelid and it detracts from your appearance. Another reason to have skin tags removed is if they are in an area that gets a lot of friction, even just from wearing clothes or jewelry, causing irritation and bleeding.

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