

ASK WELL

How Do I Get Rid of Skin Tags?

And what are they, anyway?

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Q: As I've gotten older, I've noticed more and more skin tags sprouting in odd places on my body. What are they, exactly? And is there anything I can (and should) do to get rid of them?

They can pop up in unusual places: on your neck, under your arms, maybe even around your groin.

And for many people, they can be extremely irritating — especially if they get caught on jewelry or clothing, or if they occasionally bleed.

Research suggests that more than half of adults will develop at least one skin tag during their lifetime.

The good news, said Dr. Angela Lamb, a dermatologist at Mount Sinai in New York City, is that they are harmless. “They’re completely benign,” she said. “They have zero malignant potential.”

But because skin tags can be associated with other conditions, it’s important to understand how to identify them and when to speak with a health care provider.

What are skin tags, and why do they develop?

Skin tags are soft growths that protrude from the surface of your skin. They can vary in appearance but are usually about the size of a small pebble or a grain of rice, and can be flesh-colored or darker.

Because skin tags can sometimes resemble the lesions associated with skin cancers, it’s often wise to see a doctor if you’re not sure what kind of growth you have. “Anything that’s concerning you, any new growth that’s extending from the skin, it’s a good idea just to get it checked out,” Dr. Lamb said.

As for what causes skin tags, nobody really knows, Dr. Lamb said. They’re more likely to pop up as you age and tend to appear on parts of the skin that rub against each other.

They are more common in those who are pregnant, so hormones could play a role, Dr. Lamb added. They also tend to be genetic, so “if your parents had skin tags, you’ll probably have skin tags,” she said.

Some research suggests that the presence of skin tags is associated with insulin resistance, a precursor to Type 2 diabetes.

“If you’re getting a lot of them,” said Dr. Whitney Bowe, a dermatologist based in Westchester County, N.Y., “you might want to bring it to the attention of your doctor,” who may recommend blood work.

How to get rid of skin tags

Because they don’t pose any harm, there’s no need to remove skin tags, Dr. Lamb said. However, some people like to remove them because they find them unattractive or annoying.

The safest way to remove a skin tag is with the help of a dermatologist, Dr. Bowe said, though she noted that skin tag removal typically is not covered by health insurance.

One method involves numbing the surrounding area with a shot of lidocaine, then cutting the tag off with sharp, curved scissors. The wound is then treated with a chemical substance that stops any bleeding and helps to prevent infection.

Another common in-office removal approach is electrodesiccation, Dr. Bowe said, which involves numbing the area with lidocaine and then using a special instrument to direct an electrical current to the skin tag, killing the tissue, she said.

In a third approach, known as cryotherapy, a physician dips a tweezer-like instrument into liquid nitrogen and pinches the base of the skin tag, which essentially destroys it and causes it to fall off within a few days, Dr. Bowe said. The freezing itself doesn’t hurt, she said, but you might experience some pain as the tissue thaws afterward.

After a skin tag is removed by a doctor, it’s best to cover the wound with a thin layer of an ointment such as petroleum jelly and a Band-Aid. The skin will usually heal within a week, Dr. Lamb said.

There are a handful of popular home remedies for removing skin tags, but dermatologists don’t recommend them. One involves cutting off a skin tag’s blood supply by tying a piece of string or dental floss around the base, causing it to die and fall off.

“The problem with doing that is that there’s a high risk of infection,” Dr. Bowe said, because germs often infiltrate the wound after the skin tag falls off.

Another popular yet ill-advised home approach involves dabbing an acid, such as apple cider vinegar or salicylic acid, on a skin tag. “You’re literally burning the skin tag off the skin,” Dr. Bowe explained. But “you also tend to burn the surrounding skin,” she said, causing damage that can lead to a darkening of the skin, which can persist for months.

Dr. Lamb added that people can also experience strong reactions to the acid, including allergic reactions, which could cause scarring or an infection.

Although many people prefer to have their skin tags removed, managing them can sometimes feel like a game of whack-a-mole, Dr. Bowe said.

“If you’re prone to skin tags,” she said, “they will probably grow back, or you’ll get new ones.”