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What are skin tags and how can I get rid of them?

Skin tags are extremely common, occurring in approximately 50% of adults, but when should you worry about them or look into removal options? We ask a consultant dermatologist for advice.

Despite what the youth-obsessed mass media may tell you, getting older has myriad benefits – not least the feeling that (at long last) one is comfortable in one's own skin. Metaphorically, at least.

The [ageing process](#) has its downsides, of course, the majority of them health-related. Skin tags, for example, tend to appear when people are north of their half-century, and are extremely common, occurring in approximately 50% of adults.

The number of these small growths that may develop varies from one to hundreds, and skin tags can also differ in size.

What are skin tags?

Skin tags are growths on the skin usually suspended on a slender stalk. They consist of loose collagen (protein) fibres and blood vessels surrounded by skin. They're quite common and harmless, and unlike, say, [warts](#), they are non-contagious. However, they can also be removed if you find them unsightly.

"Skin tags are benign lesions," says [Dr Zainab Laftah](#), a consultant dermatologist and spokesperson for the British Skin Foundation. "They do not cause any pain or discomfort, unless at sites of friction, where they may become inflamed."

What do skin tags look like?

Skin tags are smooth, soft, skin-coloured skin lesions frequently found on the neck, armpits, around the groin, under the breasts and on eyelids.

Skin tags can vary in colour and size from a few millimetres up to 5 cm (about 2 in) wide and hang off the skin..

What causes skin tags?

The precise cause of skin tags is unknown. However, because they tend to grow at sites where the skin rubs against itself, they more commonly affect overweight people, who may have excess skin folds and suffer from skin chafing.

Are skin tags from HPV?

According to a [2008 study](#) in India that analysed 37 skin tags from different parts of the body, the human papillomavirus (HPV) may be a factor, with the results showing HPV DNA in almost [50%](#) of the skin tags examined.

Can pregnancy cause skin tags?

Skin tags affect men and women equally; however, the risk of developing skin tags increases during pregnancy. This is thought to be due to hormonal changes and increased levels of growth factors. In rare cases, multiple skin tags can be a sign of a hormone imbalance or an endocrine problem.

Are skin tags a sign of diabetes?

Skin tags are common in people with high resistance to insulin (the major factor underlying [type 2 diabetes](#)). This theory was borne out by a [2010 study](#) in Brazil, which found that the presence of multiple skin tags was associated with insulin resistance, a high body mass index (BMI), and high triglycerides.

Are skin tags dangerous?

Skin tags are harmless - they do not cause any pain and are not a sign of skin cancer. For some people, skin tags have an impact on their [self-esteem](#), so skin tag removal is always an option.

How to remove skin tags

In general, skin tags don't require treatment, and sometimes smaller skin tags fall off on their own. However, you may consider having your skin tags removed for either cosmetic reasons or if they snag on clothing or jewellery.

Skin tag removal bands

Some skin tag removal kits aim to cut off the supply of blood to the base of the tag with a tiny band, a process called ligation. The idea is that, without a supply of blood, the cells will die and the tag will fall off, usually within 10 days.

Skin tag removal cream

Kits containing cream and an applicator are also available. Some recommend cleaning the skin with an alcohol wipe and filing down the tag before applying the cream, to ensure it is fully absorbed. The cream may cause a mild stinging sensation; the skin tags should fall off within 2-3 weeks.

Liquid nitrogen spray for skin tags

Certain skin tag removal products also contain liquid nitrogen. The patient should avoid spraying these on to surrounding skin and may want to apply petroleum jelly around the tag for protection. Several applications may be necessary before the growth falls away (again, usually within 10 days).

Risks of removing skin tags

A range of skin tag [removal products and techniques](#) (for example tea tree oil) is available on the high street and online, but, according to Laftah, there are significant risks associated with trying to remove a skin tag at home, not least of all because there's no guarantee they're medically reviewed.

"Removal, particularly of large skin tags, should not be attempted at home due to the risks of infection and bleeding," she says. "There is also a risk of scarring and recurrence." Speak to your GP for additional information.

Surgical skin tag removal

Remember: you should always seek expert medical advice if you are concerned about a skin tag or any other skin lesion.

If you have decided to have a skin tag removed, several straightforward procedures are available, but be aware that this is regarded as cosmetic surgery, and is rarely available through the NHS.

"Skin tags are easily treated with common removal procedures such as cauterisation (burnt off), cryotherapy (frozen off) or excision (cut out)," says Laftah. "These procedures should be carried out by a trained medical professional. The potential risks include infection, bleeding, scarring and recurrence.

"It is advisable to see your GP or a dermatologist if a skin tag starts to increase in size, becomes painful and/or bleeds, or you suddenly develop multiple skin tags."

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Authored by:	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP	
Originally Published: 20/11/2023	Next review date: 09/08/2019	Document ID: doc_31066

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