Skin cysts

What is a skin cyst

Many lumps commonly called sebaceous cysts are actually epidermoid or pilar cysts. These contain keratin, a protein made by skin cells, rather than sebum or oil. Pilar cysts are particularly common on the scalp.

Common locations

Skin cysts can appear anywhere on the body but are most commonly found on the:

- Scalp.
- Face.
- Neck.
- Back.
- Chest.

Symptoms

- A round, smooth lump under the skin.
- Usually painless unless inflamed or infected.
- May have a central punctum (small opening).
- Can become red, swollen, or tender if inflamed or infected.
- Occasionally discharge foul-smelling material if ruptured.

Are skin cysts dangerous

Skin cysts are benign (non-cancerous) and typically harmless. However, they can become uncomfortable, infected, or cosmetically concerning.

Treatment options

Monitoring

- If the cyst is small, painless, and not changing, no treatment may be needed.

Incision and drainage

- Drainage may be needed for an abscess or a severely inflamed cyst, after clinical assessment.
- This relieves symptoms but the cyst may return.

Surgical removal

- Minor procedure done under local anaesthetic.
- Removes the entire cyst wall to reduce the risk of recurrence.
- Removal may be considered if a cyst repeatedly causes problems. An inflamed or infected cyst may need initial treatment before complete removal is planned.

Aftercare following removal

- Keep the wound clean and dry.
- Follow your healthcare provider’s wound care instructions.
- If stitches need removal, your team will give you a date appropriate to the site and type of closure.
- A small scar may remain at the site of removal.

When to see a doctor

- Rapid increase in size.
- Signs of infection (pain, redness, warmth, pus).
- Persistent discomfort or cosmetic concern.
- Uncertainty about the nature of the lump.

Looking after a cyst

Do not squeeze or try to drain it yourself. Redness and tenderness can reflect inflammation or infection; antibiotics are not needed for every inflamed cyst.

Get a new or uncertain lump checked, especially if it is growing, hard, fixed or ulcerated. Seek urgent advice for spreading redness, fever or rapidly increasing pain.

About this information

This leaflet explains the condition and common treatment choices. Your care team will advise what is suitable for you. If you have an operation, follow the specific preparation and aftercare instructions provided by your hospital.

Further information

NHS skin cysts

Coventry and Rugby clinical guidance on cysts