

Wendy Haaf answers your questions about health, nutrition, and well-being



What causes skin tags? Should they be removed? If so, how is that done?

A It's not entirely clear what causes these small, typically skin-coloured growths. Known medically as "acrochordons," they're harmless, affect men and women equally, and most commonly crop up on the neck, eyelids, groin, and armpits.

A tiny percentage occur in people with an inherited condition that disables a specific tumour-suppressing gene, though the condition is usually obvious, since it causes other benign tumours. For the rest, skin tags are a bit of a mystery, but we do know that certain traits are linked with an increased likelihood of developing them, beginning with age: up to 59 per cent of people may have skin tags by age 70.

They also tend to occur more frequently in people who are pregnant and/or overweight, and in those "who have glucose intolerance—either overt diabetes or getting towards it," notes Dr. Lee Green, a professor in and the chair of the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Therefore, if you start getting skin tags and haven't recently been screened for Type 2 diabetes, it's worth alerting your doctor or nurse practitioner. Skin tags may also run in families, although that may be because overweight and obesity do, too. Some physicians believe friction may play a role, since skin tags often grow in areas where two surfaces rub together.

Whether or not you're considering having a skin tag removed, get your doctor to have a look at it. "The main concern is making sure that it is in fact a skin tag," stresses Dr. Ben Barankin, a dermatologist and the medical director and founder of Toronto Dermatology Centre. "You need to get a proper diagnosis." That's because skin tags can sometimes be confused with viral infections such as warts or, albeit rarely, skin cancers. (Danger signs for the latter include a skin tag that looks different from any others, particularly if it's darker and bleeding.)

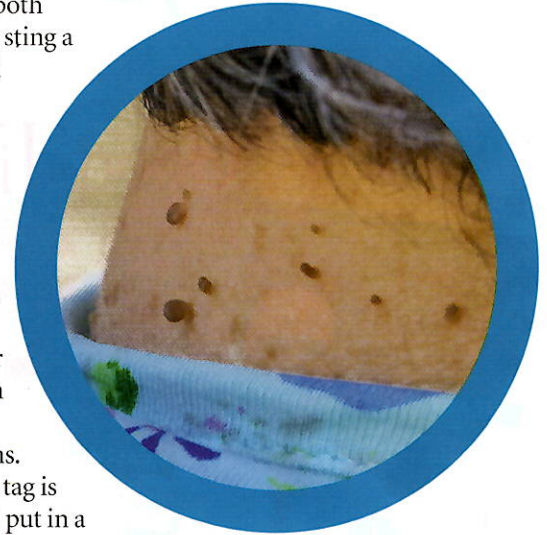
Apart from aesthetic considerations, the main reason to consider removing a skin tag, Green says, "is if it's chronically getting irritated" by rubbing on items such as clothing and jewellery. Removal can be done in

several different ways. Very small growths can be zapped with heat (electrosurgery) or cold (via a touch from fine forceps that have been dipped in liquid nitrogen); both procedures sting a bit. "Liquid nitrogen is more for Caucasian skin,"

Barankin explains, since it can cause scarring for people with darker complexions.

"If the skin tag is larger, we'll put in a tiny pinch of anaesthetic, cut the skin tag off, and seal the base with cautery or aluminum chloride," he adds. Alternately, a fine suture can be tightly tied around the base and left in place until the growth dries up and drops off. DIY options aren't recommended due to the increased risk for infection, bleeding, and scarring. (If the underlying cause is a virus, injuring the growth may allow the infection to spread to surrounding skin.) It's also worth noting that removal isn't a cure. "You'll likely get more down the road," Barankin says.

Whether or not your provincial health plan will pick up the tab for these procedures depends on where you live. In Alberta, Lee says, the removal of skin tags that are chronically irritated is sometimes considered medically necessary and so is covered. On the other hand, in Ontario, Barankin says, removal generally isn't covered, since the growths themselves are benign. Costs vary from one practice to another and according to factors such as the number of lesions, with costs usually ranging from roughly \$50 to \$150, though some clinics charge \$200 or more. ■



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WRITE TO: Your Health Questions, *Good Times*,
4475 Frontenac, Montreal, QC, H2H 2S2
goodtimes@bayardcanada.com

