

Foot, leg, and ankle swelling

Definition

Painless swelling of the feet and ankles is a common problem, especially among older people.

Abnormal buildup of fluid in the ankles, feet, and legs is called edema.

Alternative Names

Swelling of the ankles - feet - legs; Ankle swelling; Foot swelling; Leg swelling; Edema - peripheral; Peripheral edema

Considerations

Painless swelling may affect both legs and may include the calves or even the thighs. Because of the effect of gravity, swelling is particularly noticeable in the lower part of the body.

Causes

Foot, leg, and ankle swelling is common with the following situations:

- Being overweight
- Blood clot in the leg
- Increased age
- Leg infection
- Veins in the legs that cannot properly pump blood back to the heart

Injury or surgery involving the leg, ankle, or foot can cause swelling. Swelling may also occur after pelvic surgery, especially for cancer.

Long airplane flights or car rides, as well as standing for long periods of time, often lead to some swelling in the feet and ankles.

Swelling may occur in women who take estrogen or during parts of the menstrual cycle. Most women have some swelling during pregnancy. More severe swelling during pregnancy may be a sign of preeclampsia (also called toxemia), a serious condition that includes high blood pressure and swelling.

Swollen legs may be a sign of heart failure, kidney failure, or liver failure. In these conditions, there is too much fluid in the body.

Certain medications may also cause your legs to swell:

- Antidepressants, including MAO inhibitors (such as phenelzine and tranylcypromine) and tricyclics (such as nortriptyline, desipramine, and amitriptyline)

Normal foot



Foot with edema



ADAM.



Edema or swelling of the leg, ankle and foot

ADAM.

- Blood pressure medicines called calcium channel blockers (such as nifedipine, amlodipine, diltiazem, felodipine, and verapamil)
- Hormones like estrogen (in birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy) and testosterone
- Steroids

Home Care

Some tips that may help:

- Raise your legs above your heart while lying down.
- Exercise your legs. This helps pump fluid from your legs back to your heart.
- Follow a low-salt diet, which may reduce fluid buildup and swelling.
- Wear support stockings (sold at most drug and medical supply stores).
- When traveling, take breaks often to stand up and move around.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing or garters around your thighs.
- Lose weight if you need to.

Never stop taking any medicines you think may be causing swelling without first talking to your doctor.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call 911 if:

- You feel short of breath.
- You have chest pain, especially if it feels like pressure or tightness.

Call your doctor right away if:

- You have heart disease or kidney disease and the swelling gets worse.
- You have a history of liver disease and now have swelling in your legs or abdomen.
- Your swollen foot or leg is red or warm to the touch.
- You have a fever.
- You are pregnant and have more than just mild swelling or have a sudden increase in swelling.

Also call your doctor if self-care measures do not help or swelling gets worse.

What to Expect at Your Office Visit

Your doctor will take a medical history and do a thorough physical examination, paying special attention to your heart, lungs, abdomen, lymph nodes, legs, and feet.

Your doctor will ask questions like the following:

- What body parts swell? Your ankles, feet, legs? Above the knee or below?
- Do you have swelling at all times or is it worse in the morning or evening?
- What makes your swelling better?
- What makes your swelling worse?
- Does the swelling get better when you raise your legs?
- What other symptoms do you have?

Diagnostic tests that may be done include the following:

- Blood tests such as a CBC or blood chemistry
- Chest x-ray or extremity x-ray
- ECG
- Urinalysis

The treatment will be aimed at the cause of the swelling. Diuretics may be prescribed to reduce the swelling, but they can have side effects. Home treatment for benign causes of leg swelling should be tried before drug therapy.

References

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