

Swelling in the legs, ankles, or feet

Section 1 of 6: What is swelling?

Understand leg swelling, possible causes, warning signs, evaluation, and treatment.

What should I do now?

Call 911

Call 911 for new or unexplained chest pressure that persists or returns, severe trouble breathing, collapse without normal recovery, or sudden face/arm weakness or trouble speaking. Do not drive yourself.

Contact your care team

Contact your care team promptly for increasing swelling, rapid weight change, or worsening breathlessness.

Keep your care plan

Track weight and swelling as instructed. Do not change a water pill without a specific plan.

SECTION 1

What is swelling in the legs, ankles, or feet?

Swelling occurs when extra fluid collects in the tissues. This is called edema. Shoes may feel tighter, sock marks may deepen, or the skin may look stretched.

Swelling in the ankles and feet



Without swelling



With swelling (edema)

Swelling can have several causes. An examination helps identify why.

Swelling can have several causes. Its appearance alone does not identify the cause.

Swelling can affect one leg or both. It may vary with standing, sitting, or time of day. Leg swelling does not automatically mean heart failure.

Swelling in the legs, ankles, or feet

Section 2 of 6: Possible causes

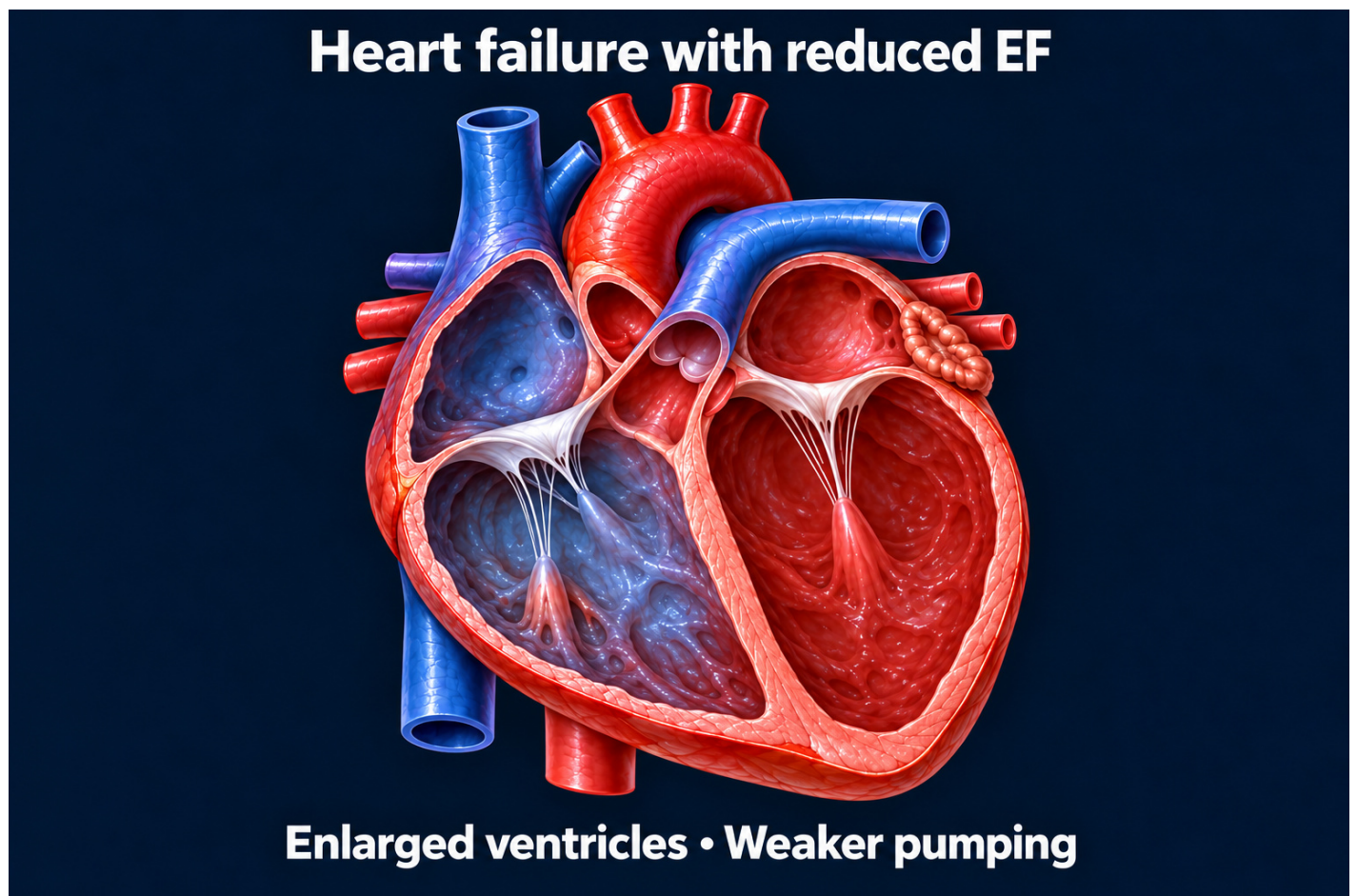
Understand leg swelling, possible causes, warning signs, evaluation, and treatment.

SECTION 2

What can cause leg swelling?

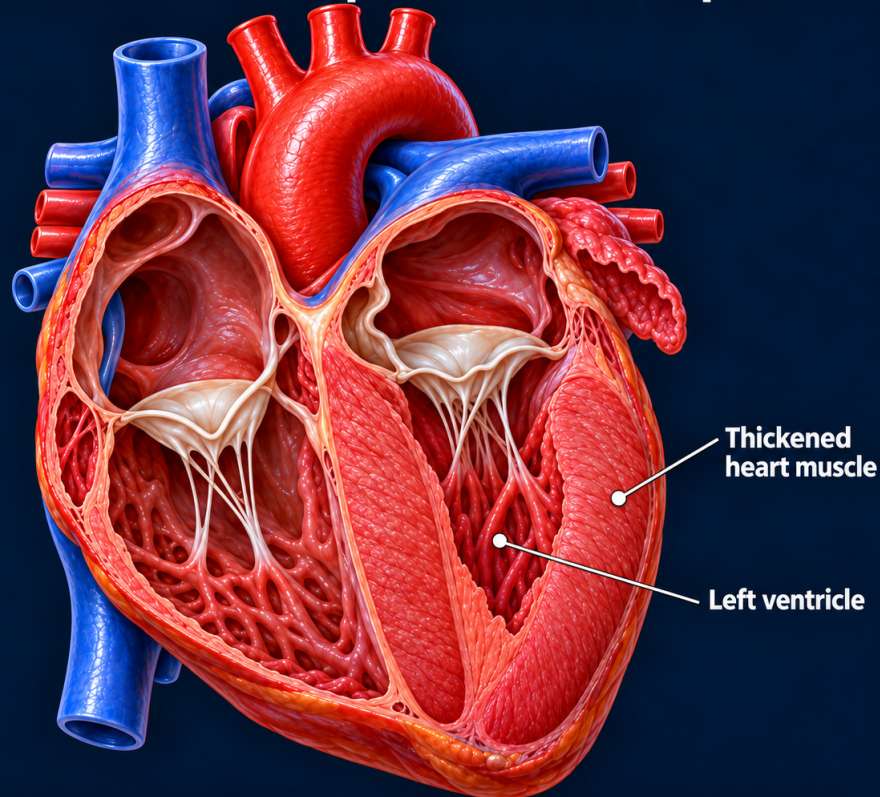
Heart failure

Raised pressures and retained salt and water can cause swelling. Breathlessness, abdominal swelling, or weight gain may occur too.



Heart failure is one possible cause. Fluid retention can also occur with preserved EF.

Heart failure with preserved EF (HFpEF)



Preserved squeezing strength • Difficulty relaxing and filling

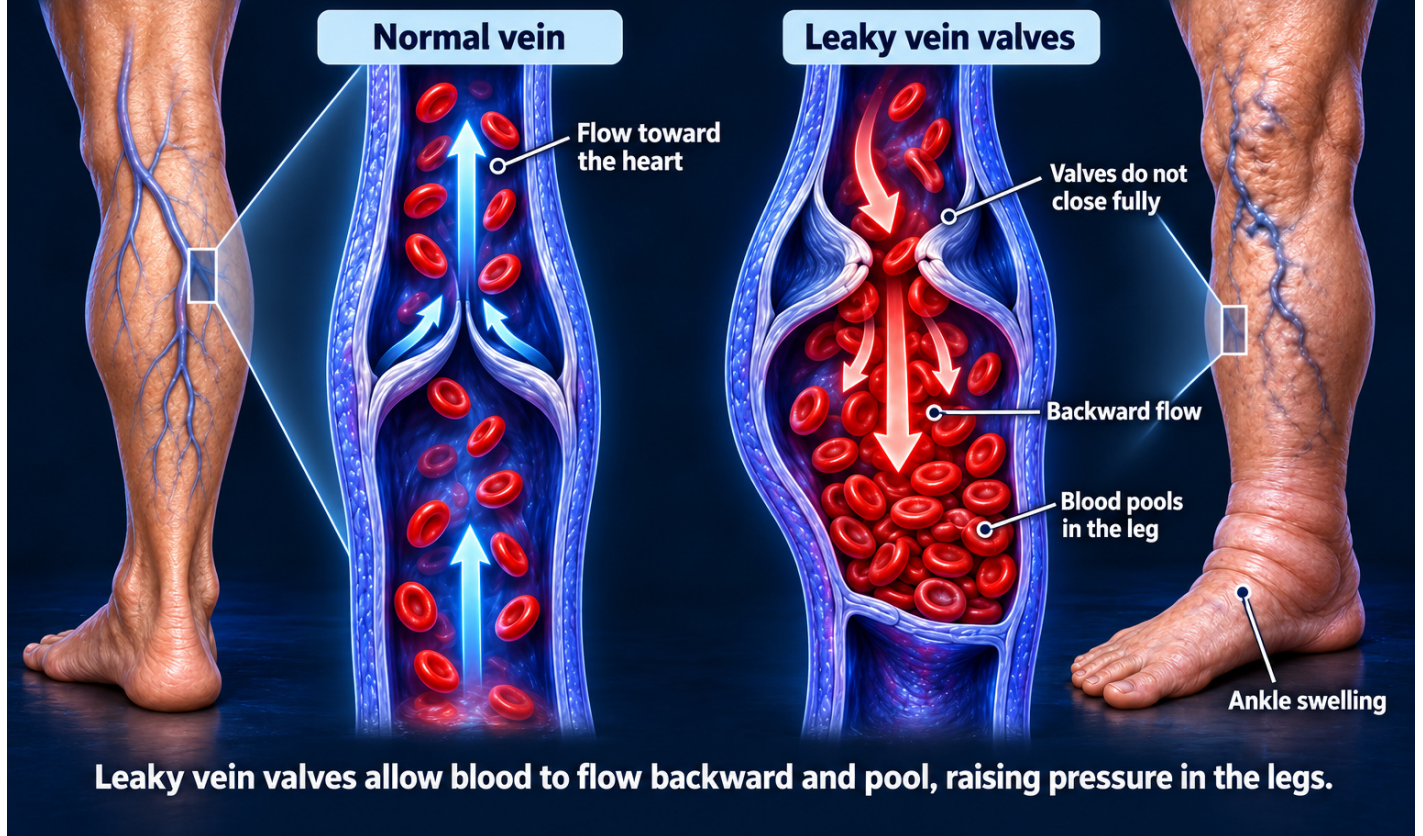
One example of HFpEF; not every patient has thickened heart muscle.

HFpEF: the heart may squeeze normally but have difficulty relaxing and filling. This can raise pressures and contribute to swelling. Not every patient has thickened heart muscle.

Venous insufficiency and lymphatic problems

Leg veins contain one-way valves that help blood return to the heart. When these valves do not close properly, blood can flow backward and pool in the legs. This is called venous insufficiency. Lymphatic drainage problems can also cause swelling.

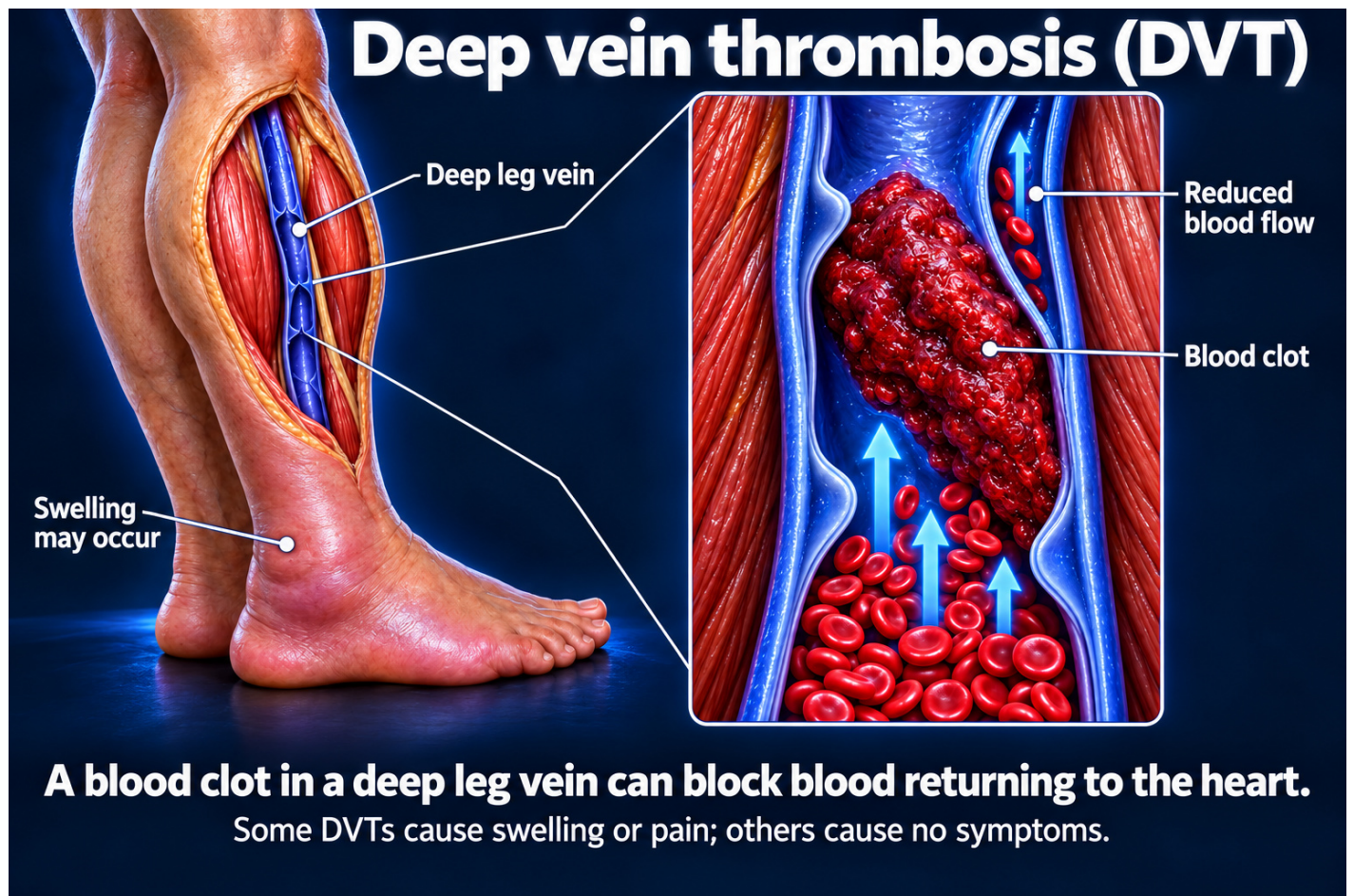
Venous insufficiency



Leaky leg vein valves allow backward flow and pooling, contributing to ankle swelling.

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT)

A blood clot in a deep leg vein can block blood flow and cause swelling, often in one leg. Pain, warmth, or redness may occur. New one-sided swelling needs urgent assessment for a clot or another cause.



DVT: a clot in a deep leg vein can obstruct blood returning to the heart. Some clots cause swelling or pain; others cause no symptoms.

Other causes

Kidney or liver disease, certain medicines such as amlodipine, injury, infection, or a blood clot may be responsible. Prolonged sitting or standing can contribute.

The pattern and accompanying symptoms guide assessment. A new one-sided change deserves particular attention.

Swelling in the legs, ankles, or feet

Section 3 of 6: When to seek help

Understand leg swelling, possible causes, warning signs, evaluation, and treatment.

SECTION 3

When should I seek help?

Call 911 for leg swelling with sudden breathlessness, chest pain, fainting, or coughing up blood.

A blood clot in the lungs or another emergency may be present.

Seek prompt assessment

New swelling in one leg, especially with pain, warmth, or redness, needs urgent evaluation for a clot or infection. Do not massage a newly swollen, painful leg.

Contact your clinician for persistent or worsening swelling, skin sores, or rapid weight gain. If you have heart failure, follow your action plan for changes in weight, swelling, or breathing.

Swelling in the legs, ankles, or feet

Section 4 of 6: Evaluation

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SECTION 4

How is swelling evaluated?

Your clinician checks whether one or both legs are affected, examines the skin and circulation, and reviews medicines and symptoms.

Tests depend on the suspected cause

- Blood and urine tests: May assess kidney function, liver function, or protein loss.
- Leg ultrasound: May look for a clot or vein problems.
- Heart testing: An EKG, blood tests, or echo may be appropriate when heart failure is suspected.

Lower extremity ultrasound



Ultrasound helps evaluate blood flow and look for clots in the leg veins.

A leg vein ultrasound can look for blood clots and assess vein blood flow. The type of ultrasound depends on the suspected cause of swelling.



An echo helps assess the heart when swelling may be related to heart disease.

Not everyone with ankle swelling needs all of these tests.

Swelling in the legs, ankles, or feet

Section 5 of 6: Treatment

Understand leg swelling, possible causes, warning signs, evaluation, and treatment.

SECTION 5

How is swelling treated?

Treatment depends on the cause. Heart-related fluid buildup may require diuretics and treatment of the underlying heart condition.

For appropriate patients with vein-related swelling, leg elevation, regular movement, and fitted compression may help. Your clinician should first determine whether compression is suitable, particularly if you have circulation problems or new unexplained swelling.

A medicine-related cause may improve after a clinician changes treatment. A clot or infection requires its own specific treatment.

Water pills are not appropriate for every swollen ankle. Do not change doses, stop medicines, or sharply restrict fluids without a plan from your care team.

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Section 6 of 6: Your appointment

Understand leg swelling, possible causes, warning signs, evaluation, and treatment.

SECTION 6

Preparing for your appointment

- When did swelling begin, and is it in one leg or both?
- Does it improve overnight or with elevation?
- Is there pain, warmth, redness, or a skin wound?
- Have you had breathlessness, abdominal swelling, or weight gain?
- Have you recently traveled, had surgery, or been less mobile?

Bring medicines and doses, recent changes, and weight readings if you already track them. A dated photograph may help show changes over time.

Ask about the cause, whether compression is appropriate, and which changes to report. Do not wait for an office visit if emergency symptoms develop.

Sources & further reading

[MedlinePlus: Leg and ankle swelling](#)

[Cleveland Clinic: Venous insufficiency](#)

[NHLBI: Deep vein thrombosis and blood clots](#)

Updated October 2026. Educational information; your own care plan may differ. Medical illustrations are simplified examples for teaching.