What’s with the lumps in my underarm area? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have two lumps in my underarm and they are very sore, they go away after a week or two, and then come back in a couple of weeks. It's been happening for almost two years. Some of my family says it could be a reaction from my deodorant. What is this caused from, what could this be? Is it possible that it is cancerous? It happens under both arms. Sometimes it gets so big that it hurts to even have my arms down to my side.

Answer

Dear Reader,

The lumps you describe could be any number of things, including cysts (fluid-filled sacs), enlarged lymph nodes, abscesses (pockets of infection), infected hair follicles, or swollen sweat glands.

Let's talk first about your primary concern: could these lumps be cancer? The only way to find out for sure is for your health care provider to do a biopsy, taking a small sample of one of the lumps and examining it in a laboratory for cancer cells. Luckily, you've included lots of reassuring information about your situation that speaks against these lumps being cancerous:

- You have noticed the lumps on both underarm areas (cancer is rarely symmetrical).
- The lumps go away completely (cancer usually doesn't spontaneously recede).
- You have had this condition for a couple of years without new symptoms or worsening (people with cancer usually notice more and more symptoms over time).

You mention a biweekly cycle of these lumps appearing and then disappearing. If you are a woman, have you ever noticed whether the lumps have a tendency to appear and disappear at a particular point during your monthly menstrual cycle? This might suggest that they are responding to hormonal shifts that occur regularly. For example, a condition called hidradenitis suppurativa causes painful, underarm (or groin) lumps that come and go with hormonal shifts.

Have you ever noticed whether the lumps appear at a certain time in relation to when you shave your armpits? You could be sensitive to a shaving cream that you're using, you could be inadvertently cutting yourself during shaving, or you could be getting an infection of a hair follicle (foliculitis).
And yes, you could be allergic to your deodorant, although the fact that the lumps appear and disappear suggests that they may not be due to deodorant allergy, if you have been using the deodorant all along. You could test whether you're allergic to your deodorant by stopping it for several weeks.

Deciding on treatment for these lumps will require your health care provider to figure out their cause. Try to make the appointment at a time when you expect the lumps to be in full force. Treatments for benign lumps include:

**By yourself:**
- Hot compresses
- Over-the-counter pain medicine (such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen)

**With a health care provider:**
- Lancing (using a needle or a scalpel to open the lump up and drain out any fluid or pus within)
- Antibiotics for suspected infection (either applied directly to the area or taken by mouth)
- Acne-type medications to control outbreaks
- Birth control pills or other hormonal manipulations to even out the hormones that may be encouraging the swelling

A couple of things absolutely NOT to do:
- Don't squeeze the lumps in an effort to "pop" them.
- Don't ever try to poke the lumps with a needle in an effort to drain them yourself.

Squeezing or poking the lumps could result in a serious infection. Since you are experiencing significant pain, your best course of action at this point is to see a health care provider. Hopefully they can quickly diagnose the lumps and make them disappear for good!

Alice!

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