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Autor: Steinemann, Nelly
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Health Corner

Doc I have a lump – could it be cancer?

Part 2 – continuation from last Helvetia edition

Kyle (15) has a lump. He comes with his mother and feels a bit awkward: the lump is behind his left nipple. *It is slightly tender to touch, feels a bit like a button and can be moved. Men do have some breast tissue too; in adolescence they can develop this condition called 'pubertal gynaecomastia'. The swelling mostly stays for several months, in fact up to two years, then disappears without any treatment. I try to reassure Kyle, and also tell him that others really don't notice this small swelling, and it won't affect his masculinity (PS: Did you know, men can develop breast cancer too? It's fairly rare, aggressive and often happens in those unfortunate men where breast and/or ovarian cancer runs in the family)*

Luke (32) has had a lump at the back of his elbow for three weeks. It's large and feels like it's full of fluid. It does not hurt him. *He probably has 'bursitis', inflammation of the bursa. A bursa (literally: sac, purse) is a bag that sits over a joint and produces just enough fluid to make the skin structures move easily over the joint. Sometimes the bursa gets inflamed and produces far too much fluid – that's what Luke might have. People frequently get it over the knee too. There is no point in just removing the fluid as it will accumulate again in no time. Injecting a steroid may prevent this. The advice usually is to wait and the fluid will go down eventually, but it can take several weeks. The whole bag can be cut out, but it's better to wait first. Occasionally germs manage to get into the fluid and then might need to be opened up; this needs to be done in hospital.*

Mary (19) has several painful lumps in her right armpit. They vary in size and seem to be within the skin. *She has a condition called 'hidradenitis suppurativa'; the sweat glands of the skin have a tendency to get blocked and infected. It happens in armpits and / or groins. Antibiotics are given, but sometimes patients are advised to have an operation where the affected skin is removed and a skin graft given.*

Nick (39) has had a lump at the back of his right wrist for five months.

It has not grown in size, is a little sore and feels hard and tense. *Nick probably has a fluid collection there, which is called a ganglion. It is never anything nasty, but sometimes can be painful and / or interfere with movement. They sometimes can burst when they are hit and that's the end of them. The traditional advice was to hit them with the bible. Ganglions sometimes do shrink when a steroid is injected. They are operated on if need be.*

Oscar (63) has a lump in his groin. It's a disappearing lump – pops out when he coughs, or strains, but he can push it back again. *It had first appeared when he helped his son-in-law concrete the drive and had lifted a bag of cement. Sounds like an inguinal hernia ('Leistenbruch'). It's a defect in the muscles of the abdominal wall. Contents from inside the abdomen pop underneath the skin. Usually it's not anything dangerous. Occasionally the hernia swells up, gets stuck in the opening and has its blood supply blocked (strangulation). That's very painful and needs to be attended to urgently. Otherwise it can be operated on when convenient, often done with keyhole surgery. Mesh is used to close the defect.*

Olivia (26) has a painful lump in her left groin. She feels quite unwell and also has a small very painful spot on her vulva. *It's so sore that she finds it just about impossible to pass urine. What I find is most difficult to convey to Olivia is that her partner has not necessarily been unfaithful. Yes, she very likely has genital herpes. But she might not have acquired it recently. Or her partner may have been infected for a long time, without being aware of it. Herpes is very widespread; at least a third of the sexually active community have had exposure. I give her treatment and refer her to a very helpful website: www.herpess.org.nz.*

Patrick (42) has noticed a lump on his right testicle. Well, it seems a bit behind and separate from the testicle. There is no pain. He has a similar but smaller lump on the left side. *This might be a cyst of the epididymis (Nebenhoden). They are always benign. A doctor needs to check this out to confirm it's not part of the testicle. He may well need an ultrasound. Men can develop cancer of the testicle and this prognosis needs to be excluded.*

Pam (38) has a large lump on her vulva. It feels smooth and does not hurt

her. *A 'Bartholin Cyst' is caused by a blockage in one of the glands that help lubricate the vagina and is filled with fluid. It is not dangerous but not very pleasant and can be operated on. Unfortunately just removing the fluid does not help. Sometimes the cyst can get infected and that is very painful. In that case, it should be opened up and drained.*

Peter (23) has lumpiness on the skin of his left testicle. He has had it for some months and it is not hurting him. *It is on the upper part of the testicle and feels quite irregular. There is a similar, smaller swelling on the right side. This is another common condition, which mainly younger men develop. It is a collection of varicose veins. Some doctors feel it can be related to fertility problems – too much blood causes the sperms to be too hot, which is not good. It can be treated with an operation or laser.*

Rose (29) is 32 weeks pregnant. She has just developed a very painful lump at her back passage. She can hardly sit down, which makes life very difficult. *She thinks it's a pile / hemorrhoid. I see the lump has a dark blue tinge. It's probably a 'thrombosed perianal haematoma' (a clot in a vein, not one of the dangerous clots). In medical language that's a bit different from a hemorrhoid. I am glad I can offer her fast relief: I inject a bit of local anesthetic and make a small cut to express the clot. Very rarely does this cause prolonged bleeding or infection and only occasionally the clot re-forms. She is happy to leave the surgery with much less pain.*

Sian (18) has a lump in the centre of her lower back, over her tailbone. It has been there for two weeks and is increasingly painful. *There is a bit of a blood stained discharge. A pilonidal cyst is caused by an ingrown hair. Sometimes hot compresses and / or antibiotic treatment help, sometimes an operation is needed. Although not dangerous, it often takes a long time to heal.* Nelly Steinemann

