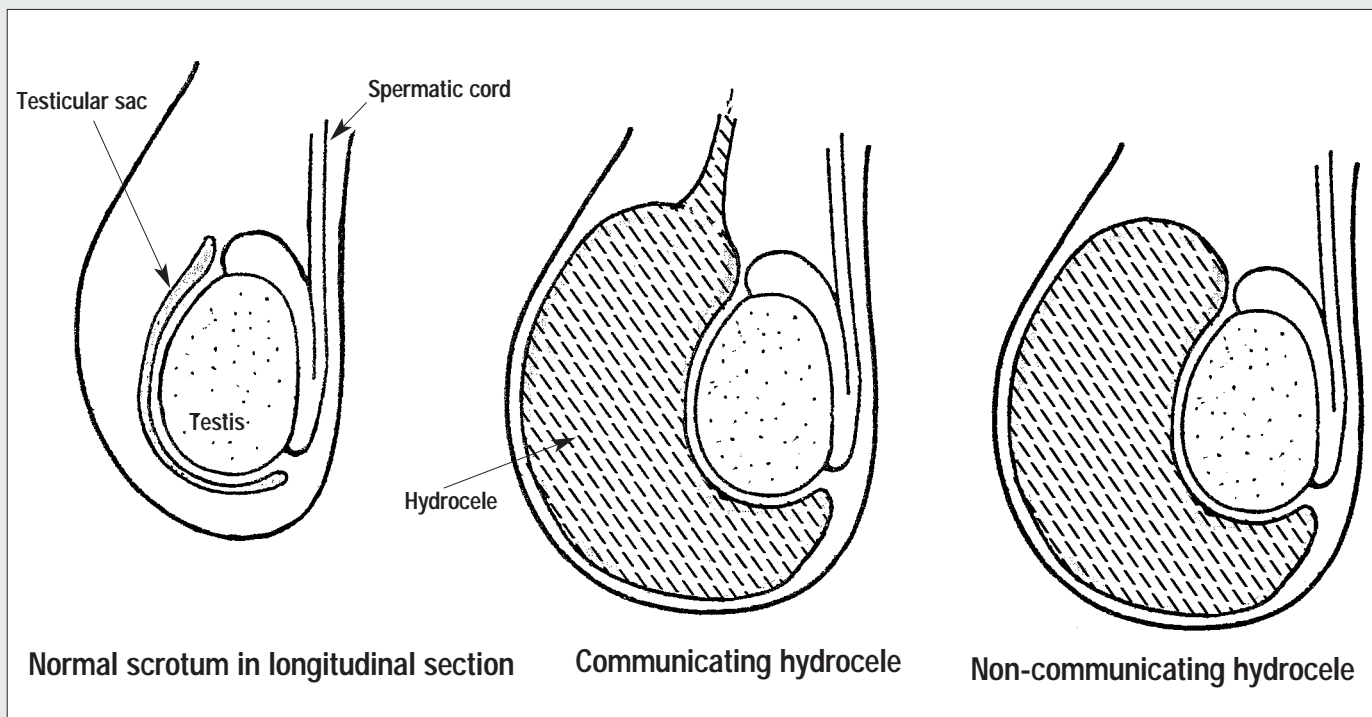


# Hydroceles



## What is a hydrocele?

A hydrocele is a soft swelling surrounding and enveloping the testicle. It is caused by an abnormal collection of watery fluid in the sac around the testicle ('hydro' means water and 'cele' means hollow tumour). The fluid, called serous fluid, is a light amber-coloured sterile, clear liquid. There are two main types of hydroceles:

1. Communicating, usually in infants;
2. Non-communicating, usually in adult males.

## Who usually gets a hydrocele?

It can occur in males at any age, although it tends to occur at the extreme ends of the age spectrum. Baby boys may start life with a communicating hydrocele, while elderly men are prone to developing a build up of fluid in the testicular sac.

## What are the causes of hydroceles?

### Communicating hydroceles

About 5% of male infants are born with this type of hydrocele because the long tube that connects the scrotum to the

peritoneal cavity of the abdomen during life in the womb has not sealed over by birth as it normally does.

This allows serous fluid to drain from the abdomen to the scrotum and the fluid tends to stay there as if fed by gravity. However, as the child grows older the connecting tube seals itself, the fluid is absorbed and the hydrocele usually disappears. Most hydroceles in children disappear in the first 12 months. Only occasionally do they persist beyond 12 months and, if so, surgery may be necessary to close the tube.

### Adult-onset hydroceles

The normal double-layered sheath around the testicle contains just enough fluid to allow good lubrication. Sometimes an excessive amount is produced and cannot be absorbed, so the swelling persists. There seems to be no particular reason why this happens. Sometimes the excessive fluid can be a reaction to a cause such as an injury to the testicle, infection, inflammation or a tumour of the testicle.

## What are the symptoms?

There are usually no symptoms apart from the swelling, which may cause embarrassment or anxiety. However, hydroceles can cause a dragging discomfort in the scrotum and groin. Sometimes hydroceles can become huge and these are more likely to cause pain and discomfort.

The diagnosis is usually made by shining a pen torch through the scrotum whereby the fluid-filled mass will illuminate the scrotum. This glowing effect is called transillumination.

The best way to confirm the diagnosis is by an ultrasound. If a tumour or other problem is suspected as an associated cause your doctor will organise an ultrasound investigation.

## What are the risks?

Hydroceles are usually harmless and men learn to live with them.

They can get infected, especially if they are drained (aspirated) with a needle on a regular basis.

The main concern is the possible association of an infec-

tion, such as tuberculosis, or a malignant tumour. However, these are uncommon. Another concern is the association with an inguinal hernia, especially in infants.

## What is the treatment?

Surgical treatment is the most effective way to remove a troublesome hydrocele. This is rarely necessary in infants so a wait-and-see approach is followed until 12 months. However, if an inguinal hernia is present, urgent surgery is necessary because the hernias tend to strangulate.

The operation for a hydrocele is a simple one. In adults it is usually done by removing part of the covering sheath that produces and traps the serous fluid.

In elderly men it is common to aspirate fluid using a simple needle under general anaesthetic. This can be repeated as necessary. Unfortunately the swelling tends to recur.

Some doctors prevent this by injecting an irritating acidic solution into the hydrocele to stop the lining of the sac producing fluid.

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