What is a lipoma?
A lipoma is a common and harmless tumour of fat cells and is also known as a fatty tumour.

It grows under the skin in the subcutaneous tissue which contains many fat cells. It is slow growing and may occur singly or in multiple numbers.

Where are they usually located?
Lipomas are most common around the shoulders, neck, trunk and arms. They are also found on the upper thighs and low back but can occur anywhere on the body where there is fat tissue.

Who usually gets lipomas?
They can occur at all ages from puberty to old age but are more common in middle age. They affect both sexes equally.

What are the features of lipomas?
Lipomas are dome-shaped or egg-shaped lumps about 2cm to 10cm in diameter (some can even grow larger). The lumps are well defined. They feel soft and smooth and are easily moved under the skin with the fingers. Some people describe the feel as “rubbery” or “doughy”. The skin over the lump appears quite normal. Lipomas usually cause no symptoms such as pain, itching or a feeling of pressure.

What is the cause of lipomas?
The cause is unknown but the tendency to develop lipomas seems to be inherited and many patients have a family history of the tumours. Injury such as blunt blows to the body may trigger growth of a lipoma.

What happens to them?
Some may continue to grow and become a nuisance but this is uncommon. Most remain relatively small and can be safely left for the duration of a person’s lifetime.

What is the risk?
There is no risk — they do not become malignant. Exceptionally large lipomas may interfere with the function of adjacent muscles.

What is the treatment?
Most lipomas require no treatment, but some people choose to have them removed. This is a simple procedure which involves making a small surgical incision over the tumour and shelling the tumour out. Local anaesthetic is used. Some larger lipomas can be removed by the technique of liposuction. There is a tendency for recurrence after removal.