

Cellulitis

WHAT IS CELLULITIS?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin and the tissues directly beneath it caused by bacteria. Usually *Staphylococcus aureus* (also called Staph) or Group A beta haemolytic streptococcus.

Cellulitis can affect anyone, although you are more at risk if you smoke, have diabetes or have poor circulation.

WHAT CAUSES CELLULITIS?

Cellulitis can affect most parts of the body and usually occurs in areas of skin that have been damaged.

Bacteria enter the broken or damaged skin and cause an infection in the tissue under the skin. This infection can spread easily. You will need antibiotics to treat the infection.

Areas that typically become infected include:

- insect bites, burns, abrasions (grazes) or cuts
- surgical wounds
- where the skin is disturbed or broken, typically with skin problems such as patches of eczema, psoriasis, scabies or acne
- a foreign object being embedded in the skin, such as metal or glass.

Sometimes bacteria enter through undamaged skin. It may not be possible to find an exact cause.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Redness of the skin
- Warmth, hotter to touch than surrounding skin
- Swelling or tightness of the affected area
- Tenderness or pain in an area of skin

- Discharge, such as leaking of yellow, clear fluid or pus
- Sweats and fevers
- Swollen local lymph glands

TREATMENT

Antibiotics are needed to treat the infection. How they are given depends on the particular features of the case. Sometimes they are given by mouth (orally – for example, tablets) and sometimes intravenously (into a vein through a drip). Stronger doses can be given in this way. Intravenous treatment is given in hospital or sometimes at home by a visiting doctor or nurse. As the infection improves you will be switched to antibiotics that can be taken by mouth (oral).

Antibiotics are usually needed for a week to 10 days. Make sure you finish the entire course of antibiotics, even if you are feeling better after a few days.

The area of affected skin may be marked with a pen to see whether the infection is spreading or improving.

Your doctor may take a swab from your skin, which will be sent to a laboratory for testing. It can take a few days to get a result. Your local doctor will be told if there are any concerns with the results. You may also have a blood test.

HOME CARE

- Get plenty of rest. This gives your body a chance to fight the infection.
- Raise the area of the body involved as high as possible. This will ease the pain and swelling, help drainage and reduce swelling.

- If you have pain, take simple pain medication such as paracetamol. Check the label for the correct dose. The pain will ease as the infection improves.

Cellulitis is spread by skin-to-skin contact or by touching infected surfaces. Stop the spread by:

- washing your hands often
- bathing or showering daily
- covering any wounds with a gauze dressing (not a band-aid)
- washing your bed linen, towels and clothing separately from other family members while the infection is healing.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Most people respond to the antibiotics in two to three days and begin to get better.

Sometimes cases initially treated with oral medication fail to improve and need intravenous medication.

In rare cases, cellulitis may spread into the blood stream. This requires urgent medical treatment and admission to hospital. Symptoms that this may have occurred include high fever, chills and shivers and feeling very unwell or faint. If these occur, return to the emergency department or urgent care centre immediately.

FOLLOW-UP

You may be advised to see your local doctor in a day or two to be sure that the cellulitis is improving. Make sure you attend this appointment.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

You need to see a doctor or healthcare professional promptly if you:

- have a fever or high temperature (over 38.5°C in adults) or chills (shaking)
- begin vomiting
- are having trouble walking
- notice the red area getting much bigger or there is a lot of pus.

For other medical problems or any concerns see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

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