

Cellulitis

Emergency Department factsheets



What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin caused by bacteria, usually *Staphylococcus aureus* (also called Staph) and Group A *beta haemolytic streptococcus*. These bacteria live on the skin and may enter an area of broken skin like a cut or scratch and cause an infection in the tissue under the skin. This infection can spread easily. You will need antibiotics to treat the infection.

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

Causes

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 and often it is not possible to find an exact cause.

What are the symptoms?

Cellulitis can start as a small, swollen area of pain or warmth, with redness on the skin. As this red area begins to spread, you may start to feel sick and get a fever, sometimes with chills and sweats. You may have swollen glands (lymph nodes) near the area of infected skin. The infection can spread to the rest of the body. Other symptoms include:

- 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.

Treatment

Your doctor may take a swab from your skin, which will be sent to the laboratory for testing. It can take a few days to get a result. The area is marked with a pen to see whether the infection is spreading.

Your local doctor will be told if there are any concerns with the results. You may also have a blood test.

Antibiotics are needed to treat the infection and are sometimes given intravenously (into the vein through a drip). Stronger doses can be given in this way. This treatment is given in hospital or sometimes at home with a local doctor or nurse.

When the infection improves you can be switched to antibiotics that can be taken by mouth (oral) for a week to ten days. It is important you finish the entire course of antibiotics, even if you are feeling better after one or two days.

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.
- Take painkillers such as paracetamol or codeine, if you have pain. 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 the wound 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.

Do not let dressing become wet. If it does get wet, it will need to be changed. Do not swim until infection clears up

What to expect

Most people respond to the antibiotics in two to three days and begin to get better. In rare cases, cellulitis may spread through the blood stream. This requires urgent medical treatment and admission to hospital. Cellulitis around the eye area needs careful monitoring by a doctor.

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

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

- notice the red area getting much bigger or there is a lot of pus or there are red streaks coming from the infected site.
- you develop blisters or sores in the infected area.

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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