



PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUTS

Cellulitis

Topic Overview

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is a skin infection caused by bacteria. Normally, your skin helps protect you from infection. But if you have a cut, sore, or insect bite, bacteria can get into the skin and spread to deeper tissues. If it is not treated with antibiotics, the infection can spread to the blood or lymph nodes. This can be deadly.

Some people can get cellulitis without having a break in the skin. These include older adults and people who have diabetes or a weak immune system. These people are also more likely to develop dangerous problems from cellulitis. And they are more likely to get cellulitis again.

What causes cellulitis?

Cellulitis is caused by bacteria (usually strep or staph). Some people are at risk for infection by other types of bacteria. They include people with [weak immune systems](#) and those who handle fish, meat, poultry, or soil without using gloves.

What are the symptoms?

At first, the infected area will be warm, red, swollen, and tender. As the infection spreads, you may have a fever, chills, and swollen glands.

Cellulitis can occur anywhere on the body. In adults, it often occurs on the legs, face, or arms. In children, it is most common on the face or around the anus. An infection on the face could lead to a dangerous eye infection.

See a doctor right away if you have an infected area of skin and:

- The infected area is getting redder, more painful, or larger, or it has red streaks extending from it.
- You have a fever or chills.
- The infected area is on your face or your groin.

How do you get cellulitis?

There are many ways to get cellulitis. You can get it if you have:

- An injury to your skin, such as a cut, surgical wound, burn, or animal or insect bite.
- Skin problems, such as [ulcers](#), [eczema](#), [psoriasis](#), or a [fungal infection](#) like athlete's foot.
- Certain medical conditions. These include [diabetes](#), [peripheral arterial disease](#), or a weak immune system.
- Fluid buildup (edema) in the legs or arms.
- Had liposuction to remove excess fat.
- Injected illegal drugs under your skin.

How is it treated?

Doctors use antibiotics to treat cellulitis. If the infection is mild, you may be able to take antibiotic pills at home. If the infection is severe, you may need to be treated in the hospital with antibiotics that go right into your bloodstream.

If your doctor prescribes antibiotics, it is important to take them as directed. Do not stop taking them just because you feel better. You need to take the full course of antibiotics.

It is very important to get treatment right away for cellulitis. If it is not treated, the bacteria can spread quickly through the body and cause [sepsis](#), an extreme response by the body's defense system. This can be deadly. Cellulitis on the face can spread to the brain and cause a dangerous infection ([meningitis](#)). Cellulitis can also cause other serious problems, such as blood clots in the legs ([thrombophlebitis](#)).

You are more likely to have these problems if you are an older adult, have a medical condition such as diabetes or peripheral arterial disease, or have a weak immune system. Your chances of the cellulitis coming back may be higher too.

How can you prevent cellulitis?

If you are at risk for cellulitis, you can take steps to help prevent it.

- Take good care of your skin. Keep it clean, and use lotion to prevent drying and cracking.
- Check your feet and legs often. This is especially important if you have diabetes.
- Treat any skin infection, such as athlete's foot, right away.
- Ask your doctor if you need to take antibiotics on a regular basis to prevent cellulitis.
- If your doctor prescribes medicine, take it just the way your doctor says to.

Frequently Asked Questions

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Reviewed 9 June 2008