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## Cellulitis

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### Summary

- Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the skin that tends to occur on the lower legs and in areas that are damaged or inflamed.
  - Treatment requires antibiotics.
  - The sooner you start treatment the better.
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Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the skin and subcutaneous tissues (just under the skin). The most common bacteria are *staphylococcus aureus* (golden staph) and group A beta-haemolytic streptococcus. These bacteria enter broken or normal skin, and can spread easily to the tissue under the skin. You will need antibiotics to treat the infection.

Cellulitis can affect almost any part of the body. Most commonly, it occurs on the lower legs and in areas where the skin is damaged or inflamed. Anyone, at any age, can develop cellulitis. However, you are at increased risk if you smoke, have diabetes or poor circulation.

Prior to the development of antibiotics, cellulitis was fatal. With the introduction of penicillin, most people recover fully within a week.

### Symptoms of cellulitis

The range of symptoms can range from mild to severe, and can include:

- redness of the skin
- warmth
- swelling
- tenderness or pain in an area of skin
- weeping or leaking of yellow clear fluid or pus.

### Complications of cellulitis

The infection can spread to the rest of the body. The lymph nodes may swell and be noticed as a tender lump in the groin and armpit. You may also have fevers, sweats and vomiting.

### Causes of cellulitis

Cellulitis usually occurs in skin areas that have been damaged or inflamed for other reasons, including:

- trauma, such as an insect bite, burn, abrasion or cut
- a surgical wound
- skin problems, such as eczema, psoriasis, scabies or acne
- a foreign object in the skin, such as metal or glass.

Often, it is not possible to find a cause for cellulitis.

### Diagnosis of cellulitis

Tests may include:

- a swab – taken from the affected skin and sent to the laboratory for testing. It can take a few days to get a result and your doctor will be advised of the results
- other tests – such as blood tests and x-rays.

## **Treatment for cellulitis**

Antibiotics are used to treat the infection. Oral antibiotics may be adequate, but in the severely ill person, intravenous antibiotics will be needed to control and prevent further spread of the infection. This treatment is given in hospital or, sometimes, at home by a local doctor or nurse.

As the infection improves, you may be able to change from intravenous to oral antibiotics, which can be taken at home for a further week to 10 days. Most people respond to antibiotics in two to three days and begin to show improvement.

In rare cases, the cellulitis may progress to a serious illness by spreading to deeper tissues. In addition to broad spectrum antibiotics, surgery is sometimes required.

## **Self-care at home**

Suggestions include:

- 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, help drainage and reduce swelling.
- Take pain-relieving medication such as paracetamol. Check the label for how much to take and how often. The pain eases once the infection starts getting better.
- If you are not admitted to hospital, you will require a follow-up appointment with your doctor within a day or two to make sure the cellulitis is improving. This appointment is important to attend.

## **Reduce the risk of transmission**

Cellulitis may arise when skin injury or inflammation is not adequately treated. When dealing with cuts and abrasions:

- Wash your hands.
- Clean the wound with an antiseptic.
- Cover the wound with a gauze dressing or a band aid.

## **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Hospital emergency department

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Sinclair Dermatology

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