

Education

Cellulitis

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin and underlying tissue caused by streptococcal, staphylococcal, or other bacteria. This infection is serious and should receive immediate medical attention. Without treatment the infection can damage skin tissues and spread quickly through the bloodstream to the entire body. It could become life threatening.

Cellulitis is usually worse for those who have reduced resistance to infection because of illnesses or disorders such as AIDS/HIV, diabetes, or a weak immune system.

How does it occur?

Cellulitis most often occurs on the face, arms, or legs, but it can occur anywhere. Bacteria enter the body through a cut or sore. Enzymes produced by the bacteria destroy skin cells. The infection spreads over the area for about 2 days and can affect tissues below the skin.

Orbital cellulitis, a particularly dangerous infection, usually develops when bacteria enter the soft tissue around the eye socket from the sinuses or a boil near the eye. Infected tissues swell around the eye, causing it to bulge out. There is usually redness in the eye, swollen eyelids, severe pain, and fever. Other rare complications can include a temporary loss of vision, pus coming out of the eye, and meningitis if the infection spreads to the brain.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of cellulitis may include:

- redness
- swelling
- extreme tenderness or pain
- skin that feels warmer than normal
- red streaks from the wound or sore
- pus-filled sores (abscesses)
- swollen and tender lymph glands
- fever.

The symptoms of orbital cellulitis include:

- swelling of the face near the eye
- bulging eye
- swollen eyelids
- severe pain
- reddening of the eye
- temporary loss of vision
- chills
- fever
- headaches
- vomiting.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine the affected area. You may have blood tests and a culture of discharge from the wound.

How is it treated?

In most cases your health care provider will prescribe an oral antibiotic drug that you will take for about 10 to 14 days. Some infections are so serious, even at the beginning, that they require antibiotic injections or hospitalization for IV antibiotics.

If you are taking an oral medicine, your provider will probably want to see you or talk to you 1 or 2 days after your first visit to make sure the antibiotic is working.

If the cellulitis does not get better with the antibiotics prescribed by your provider, you may need to spend some time in the hospital where you can be given intravenous (IV) antibiotics.

In rare instances, if you have sinus infection that is causing orbital cellulitis, your provider may recommend an operation to drain the infection from your sinuses.

How long will the effects of cellulitis last?

Cellulitis may develop and spread for a period of 2 to 4 days. If treated promptly with antibiotics, the infection usually clears up within 1 or 2 weeks.

Cellulitis that is not properly treated may lead to:

- bacteremia (bacteria in the bloodstream)
- septicemia (blood poisoning)
- gangrene (areas of body tissue destroyed) and possibly loss of a body part (amputation)
- death.

How can I take care of myself?

- If you were prescribed an antibiotic, take all of it as prescribed.
- Ask your health care provider how to care for the infected area. For example, ask if you should put hot packs or dressings on the area.
- Sometimes the infection may get worse even though you are taking an antibiotic. Ask your provider what symptoms you should watch for and when you should check back with your provider.
- If your infection does not clear up or if new symptoms develop, contact your health care provider.

How can I help prevent cellulitis?

- Clean cuts, abrasions, and other skin injuries thoroughly with antiseptic soap.
- Keep wounds and sores clean and protected with a bandage. Remember to change the bandage daily or sooner if it becomes dirty or wet.
- See your health care provider for treatment as soon as possible if a wound or sore shows signs of infection.
- If you have diabetes, follow your instructions for good skin care and keep your blood sugar under good control (within the recommended range).

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Skin: Cross Section

