

Education

Impetigo

What is impetigo?

Impetigo is a skin infection caused by bacteria. It is more common in children than in adults. Impetigo is usually a mild infection but it can spread and cause serious illness if it is not treated.

How does it occur?

Bacteria are the cause of impetigo. The 2 types of bacteria that cause the infection are called *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Streptococcus pyogenes* (Group A streptococcus). These bacteria can live on your skin without hurting you. However, if they get into a wound, they may cause an infection.

Impetigo is more likely to happen if you have a scratch, scrape, insect bite, or other skin irritation that causes a break in the skin. Impetigo is more common when it is hot and humid and is very contagious. Physical contact, including scratching, can spread the infection to other parts of the body or to other people. It can also be spread by contaminated clothing, athletic equipment, towels, bed linen, and toys.

What are the symptoms?

Impetigo can occur on any area of skin. It often appears on the face between the upper lip and nose. The infection begins as small blisters. The blisters form pus inside and then break open. The pus from the blisters dries as a gold or yellow-colored crust. The blisters or sores are painless.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will look at the blisters or sores on your skin. Impetigo can often be diagnosed without any tests. In some cases your provider may remove a small bit of material from one of the sores for lab tests to identify the bacteria.

How is it treated?

The treatment depends on your age and the severity and type of infection that you have. If the infection is mild, all you may need to do is keep your skin clean so the infection can heal on its own. Your health care provider may prescribe an antibiotic ointment to put on your skin. For larger or more serious infections, your provider may prescribe an oral antibiotic medicine or give you a shot of antibiotic medicine.

How long will the effects last?

The sores should begin to heal within 2 to 5 days after you start using an antibiotic. If you are taking an oral antibiotic, the infection usually stops being contagious after 24 hours of treatment. If you are using an antibiotic ointment instead, the sores will no longer be contagious when they stop oozing and are drying up.

How can I help take care of myself?

Follow these tips to ease the discomfort of impetigo:

- Wash with antibacterial soap. Soak the area for 15 to 20 minutes in warm soapy water. Then gently remove the crusts.
- Cover the sores with a gauze bandage to keep the infection from spreading and to prevent scratching.
- Shave around sores, not over them.
- Avoid touching the sores more than necessary.

If your provider prescribed an antibiotic ointment, gently pat your skin dry after you wash the infected area and put a thin layer of antibiotic ointment on it. Do not use the ointment more often than directed. Wash your hands thoroughly after using this medicine.

If your provider prescribed an oral antibiotic, take all of it exactly as directed by your provider. If you stop taking the medicine too soon, the infection may not be completely gone yet or it may return.

Call your health care provider if:

- You develop a fever.
- Your skin does not begin to heal after 3 days of treatment.

How can I help prevent impetigo?

To prevent impetigo, bathe or shower daily with soap. Wash breaks in the skin with warm water and soap right away to prevent infection.

To help prevent the spread of impetigo, do not share washcloths, towels, clothing, bath water, or razors. Use hot, soapy water to wash clothes and linens.

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