

Preventing and Treating Skin Infections

Is your skin swollen, red, and tender to the touch? It could be a skin infection. If you have a skin infection, a healthcare professional can determine if you need an antibiotic.



What are Skin Infections?

Skin infections occur when bacteria infect the skin and sometimes the deep tissue beneath the skin.

- ◆ **Cellulitis** is a common type of skin infection. It causes redness, swelling, and pain in the infected area of the skin.
- ◆ Another type of skin infection is **skin abscess**, which is a collection of pus under the skin.

Causes

Different types of bacteria live on a person's skin. Cellulitis or abscess can occur if a cut or a break in the skin allow specific bacteria to enter and cause an infection.

Risk Factors

- ◆ Injury to the skin
- ◆ Skin conditions, such as athlete's foot or eczema
- ◆ Chronic swelling of the legs or arms
- ◆ Obesity
- ◆ Diabetes

Symptoms

Symptoms of cellulitis can start suddenly or increase gradually and include:

- ◆ Skin redness
- ◆ Pain
- ◆ Skin tender or warm to the touch
- ◆ Swelling of the affected area

An abscess causes similar symptoms to cellulitis with a collection of pus under the skin, which can sometimes drain.

When to Seek Medical Care

See a healthcare professional if you have symptoms of cellulitis or abscess. Although most cases resolve quickly with treatment, some can spread to the lymph nodes and bloodstream and can become life-threatening.

Talk to a healthcare professional right away if your child is under 3 months old and has a fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.



Treatment

A healthcare professional will determine if you have a skin infection by asking about symptoms and doing a physical examination.

Antibiotics are needed to treat cellulitis.

If you have a skin abscess, a healthcare professional may need to drain the pus from the abscess. Antibiotics may be needed after they drain the pus.

Any time you take antibiotics, they can cause side effects. Side effects can range from minor issues, like a rash, to very serious health problems, such as antimicrobial-resistant infections and *C. diff* infection, which causes diarrhea that can lead to severe colon damage and death. Call a healthcare professional if you develop any side effects while taking your antibiotic.

In some cases, severe infections need to be treated in the hospital.

How to Feel Better

If you are prescribed antibiotics for your skin infection:

- ◆ Take them exactly as a doctor or pharmacist tells you.
- ◆ Do not share your antibiotics with others.
- ◆ Do not save them for later.
- ◆ Talk to a doctor or pharmacist about safely discarding leftover medicines.

Talk with a doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions about your antibiotics.

Keeping the area that is infected clean is important so your skin infection can get better. If the infection is in the leg, elevating the leg can help decrease swelling.

Prevention

You can help prevent skin infections:



- ◆ Clean your hands.
- ◆ Wash skin cuts with soap and water.
- ◆ Talk to a healthcare professional about conditions, such as diabetes, that put you at increased risk for skin infections.

