

Cellulitis

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin caused by bacteria, usually *Staphylococcus aureus* (also called Staph) and Group A *beta haemolytic streptococcus*.

Cellulitis can affect anyone, although you are more at risk if you smoke, are diabetic or have poor circulation.

What causes cellulitis?

Cellulitis can affect most parts of the body, and usually occurs in areas of skin that have been damaged or inflamed.

Bacteria enter the broken or damaged skin and cause an infection in the tissue under the skin. This infection can spread easily. You will need antibiotics to treat the infection.

Areas that typically become infected include:

- insect bites, burns, abrasions (grazes) or cuts
- surgical wounds
- where the skin is disturbed or broken, typically with skin problems such as patches of eczema, psoriasis, scabies or acne
- a foreign object being embedded in the skin, such as metal or glass.

Sometimes bacteria enter through undamaged skin and often it is not possible to find an exact cause.

What are the symptoms?

- Redness of the skin.
- Warmth, hotter to touch than surrounding skin.
- Swelling or tightness of the affected area.
- Tenderness or pain in an area of skin.
- Discharge, such as leaking of yellow, clear fluid or pus.
- Sweats and fevers.

Treatment

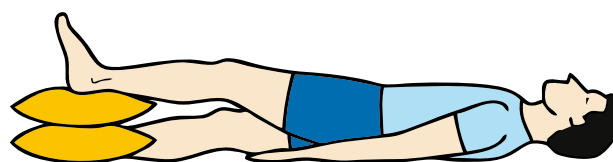
Your doctor may take a swab from your skin, which will be sent to the laboratory for testing. It can take a few days to get a result. The area is marked with a pen to see whether the infection is spreading. Your local doctor will be told if there are any concerns with the results. You may also have a blood test.

Antibiotics are needed to treat the infection and are sometimes given *intravenously* (into the vein through a drip). Stronger doses can be given in this way. This treatment is given in hospital or sometimes at home with a local doctor or nurse.

When the infection improves you can be switched to antibiotics that can be taken by mouth (oral) for a week to ten days. Make sure you finish the entire course of antibiotics, even if you are feeling better after one or two days.

Home care

- 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 and swelling, help drainage and reduce swelling.



- Take painkillers such as paracetamol or codeine, if you have pain. Check the label for the correct dose. The pain will ease as the infection improves.

Cellulitis is spread by skin-to-skin contact or by touching infected surfaces. Stop the spread by:

- washing your hands often
- bathing or showering daily
- covering the wound with a gauze dressing (not a *Band-Aid*)
- washing your bed linen, towels and clothing separately from other family members while the infection is healing.

What to expect

Most people respond to the antibiotics in two to three days and begin to get better.

In rare cases, cellulitis may spread through the blood stream. This requires urgent medical treatment and admission to hospital.

Follow-up

- You may be advised to see your local doctor in a day or two to be sure that the cellulitis is improving. Make sure you attend this appointment.



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Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



You need to see a doctor or health care professional promptly if you:

- a have a fever or high temperature (over 38.5°C in adults) or chills (shaking)
- begin vomiting
- notice the red area getting much bigger or there is a lot of pus.

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 8064 or email edfactsheets@dhs.vic.gov.au

June 2008. Also available online at www.health.vic.gov.au/edfactsheets

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