

Cellulitis

What is Cellulitis?

You have been diagnosed with cellulitis. This is an infection caused by bacteria which is spreading in the skin and surrounding tissue.

Common causes of cellulitis are staphylococcus which often lives on the skin without infection and types of streptococcus.

Why did I get cellulitis?

Often you get this when there is a break in your skin.

Specific causes include:

- Insect/spider bites
- Abrasions
- Diseased skin areas such as dry eczema, scabies, or acne
- Injuries with foreign bodies such as metal, glass, dirt
- After surgery

You are more prone to cellulitis if you have swelling in the legs from any cause and particularly if you are a diabetic or take medication which affects your immune system. If you smoke you are more likely to get cellulitis.

Sometimes no cause is found.

What can I expect in the Emergency Department?

Usually you go to the Emergency Department because you get pain, redness and swelling in the affected area. You may also feel generally unwell and this is more serious. Some cellulitis weeps clear, yellow or pus-like fluid.

Tell the doctor all your symptoms and any allergies you may have.

Depending on the severity of your cellulitis and whether you have other medical or mobility problems you may be treated in hospital, at home by nurses or simply with oral antibiotics.

In the Emergency Department you may get a first dose of intravenous antibiotics and this may be continued either as an in-patient (if you are unwell) or by hospital in the home or your GP if you are well enough to be discharged.

Various tests may be done depending on your problems including swabs of the cellulitis and blood tests if you are unwell.

Sweats and fevers are an important symptom and you must tell your doctor this.

The boundary of the cellulitis is often marked with pen and we can assess if the spreading has settled or improved. Try to avoid washing this off.

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What if I get discharged home?

You must take your antibiotics as prescribed. If you are prescribed intravenous antibiotics, a plan will be given to you to organise this.

After a short course of intravenous antibiotics, this will change to oral antibiotics. Be sure to finish the whole course of antibiotics as prescribed to you by your doctor.

You must follow up with your local doctor for results of tests done and review of the cellulitis.

The cellulitis will not improve immediately. It takes 12 – 24 hours for the antibiotics to start working and then further time for the redness to start improving.

The cellulitis should not however be rapidly spreading and if this is the case you must see your doctor immediately. If you start to have sweats and fevers you should see your doctor immediately.

Important points at home

You should rest at home until the cellulitis has settled.

You must elevate (lift) the affected part. This means elevating above the level of your heart, so using a recliner chair with pillows, in bed with pillows or on the couch with pillows.

Avoid walking long distances and working if your leg is affected.

If you have cellulitis of the arm, use a sling to keep the arm elevated at all times. This is one of the most important things you can do to help you get better, faster.

Leave dressings intact and have them attended as you are instructed.

Remember to wash your hands regularly.

Take your medications, including pain killers and antibiotics, as prescribed.

Instructions:

Seeking help:

 In a medical emergency go to your nearest emergency department or call 000.

