

Patient information factsheet

Cellulitis

Cellulitis is an infection of the deeper layers of the skin and the underlying tissue.

The main symptom of cellulitis is the affected area of skin suddenly turning red, painful swollen and hot. It most often affects the legs, but can occur anywhere on the body.

Causes

Cellulitis can have a wide range of causes, but the majority of cases are due to an infection caused by the streptococcal or staphylococcal groups of bacteria. In rarer cases, it may be caused by a fungal infection. Cellulitis develops when bacteria or fungi move down through the skin's surface through a damaged or broken area of skin, such as a cut, burn or bite. Having a skin condition such as eczema or a fungal infection of the foot or toenails (athlete's foot) can cause small breaks and cracks to develop in the surface of the skin. This makes a person more vulnerable to cellulitis.

Who is at risk?

A number of health conditions can increase your risk of developing cellulitis. These include:

- being obese (excessively overweight)
- having a weakened immune system
- having poorly controlled diabetes
- having circulation problems
- having chickenpox or shingles
- having lymphoedema (a condition that causes swelling of the arms and legs)
- having long-term untreated athlete's foot or a fungal toenail infection
- intravenous (IV) drug use
- having previous episodes of cellulitis

Preventing cellulitis

Not all cases of cellulitis can be prevented. But you can reduce the risk of developing the condition by taking steps to prevent skin wounds, and treating wounds properly when they occur.

Treating cellulitis

Treatment for cellulitis depends on what caused the infection, the severity of your symptoms and the general state of your health. You can usually be treated at home with antibiotics if you have mild symptoms.

Antibiotics

The length of the course will depend on your circumstances, including how quickly you respond to treatment and whether you have any underlying conditions such as lymphoedema.

Patient information factsheet

The most commonly prescribed antibiotic for cellulitis is flucloxacillin, which is part of the penicillin group of antibiotics. The most common side effects of flucloxacillin are mild digestive problems, such as an upset stomach or episodes of diarrhoea. If you cannot take flucloxacillin because you're allergic to penicillin, alternative antibiotics such as erythromycin or clarithromycin can be used.

If it's suspected that your cellulitis was caused by a wound being exposed to contaminated water, you will be given a combination of two different antibiotics. This is usually doxycycline or ciprofloxacin in combination with flucloxacillin or erythromycin.

When you first start taking the antibiotics, you may notice that your skin becomes redder. This is usually only a temporary reaction, and the redness should start to fade within 48 hours.

Self care

There are steps you can take at home to ease your symptoms and speed your recovery from cellulitis. Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.

If your leg is affected by cellulitis, keep it raised whilst you are resting, using pillows or a chair. This should make you feel more comfortable and help to reduce the swelling. If possible, the foot should be raised higher than the hip. If your arm is affected, try and keep your lower arm raised above your elbow.

If it's uncomfortable to raise the limb, try to lie down as much as possible. However, it's important to still regularly move the joints, such as your wrists or ankles.

Try to avoid cuts and grazes from activities that increase the risk. For example, by wearing clothing that covers your arms or legs when gardening.

You can also take steps to help prevent cellulitis from reoccurring:

- maintaining good hand hygiene
- keeping your skin moisturised
- treating cuts and grazes or any broken skin caused by a condition such as eczema
- treating fungal infections of the hands or feet, such as athlete's foot

Preventing recurrent cellulitis

People who experience frequently recurring cellulitis, such as those with lymphoedema, may be recommended to begin taking antibiotics on a long-term basis to protect against further infection. Long-term antibiotics may be prescribed if you experience recurrent cellulitis (more than two episodes a year in the same area).

Who to contact if you are concerned

If you have any concerns about your symptoms you should contact your GP or call 111 for advice.

Useful links

NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/conditions/Cellulitis/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Patient information factsheet

Have your say...

We would be very grateful if you would complete a feedback card. It's your chance to have your say on the treatment you, or a family member received throughout their hospital stay. Feedback helps us continually improve the service we give to our patients.

University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust
Tremona Road
Southampton
SO16 6YD

Main switchboard: **023 8077 7222**

The information in this factsheet has been adapted from NHS Choices www.nhs.uk

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.

© 2019 University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust. All rights reserved. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without the permission of the copyright holder.

Version 1. Reviewed March 2019. Due for review March 2022. 1358