

## UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**CELLULITIS****WHAT IS IT?**

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin and the underlying dermis and subcutaneous tissue.

- The most common site for developing cellulitis is the lower legs, especially the shins and ankles. However, cellulitis can occur anywhere on the body.
- If left untreated, the infection can spread rapidly. In severe cases, it can infect the bloodstream and become a life-threatening condition.

**WHAT CAUSES IT?**

Cellulitis occurs when bacteria enter a break in the skin and cause an infection. The two bacteria most often responsible for cellulitis are *staphylococcus* and *streptococcus*. A type of *staphylococcus* infection that is resistant to penicillin-type antibiotics known as MRSA (methicillin resistant *staphylococcus aureus*) has become more common and can be more difficult to treat.

Cuts and scrapes are common sites of infection. Areas of dry, flaky skin (such as fungal skin infections) and insect bites can serve as entry points for bacteria. However, infections can also occur where there is no visible break in the skin, such as in chronic swelling of the legs.

**WHO DOES IT AFFECT?**

Anyone can develop cellulitis. However, those at greater risk include the elderly, people with weakened immune systems, diabetics, and individuals with poor circulation.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

Cellulitis usually begins as a swollen, red area of the skin that is painful and warm to the touch.

- Left untreated, the infection can expand quickly across the skin. Red streaking of the skin is a sign of a rapidly spreading infection and requires urgent medical attention.
- Associated symptoms may include fever, chills, muscle aches, and swollen lymph nodes near the site of the infection.

**IS IT CONTAGIOUS?**

- Because cellulitis is an infection involving deeper layers of the skin, it is not as contagious as a superficial skin infection, such as impetigo.
- If the infected area is producing drainage, it should be covered with a clean dry bandage to prevent spreading the infection to others.

**HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?**

Cellulitis is usually diagnosed based on a person's symptoms and physical exam findings.

- Bloodwork that shows an elevated number of white blood cells (cells that fight infection) helps to support the diagnosis.
- A wound culture may be taken to determine the type of bacteria causing the infection, especially if MRSA is suspected.
- Further tests may be done to rule out other serious causes of your symptoms. For example, a blood clot deep in the veins of the arm or leg can also present with redness, swelling, and tenderness.

## **WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?**

### **ANTIBIOTICS**

- Cellulitis responds well to a course of antibiotics. Even if you feel better, it is important to take all the medication prescribed to completely cure the infection.
- Severe infections may require hospitalization and intravenous (IV) antibiotics.

### **OTHER TREATMENT TIPS**

- **Over-the-counter medications** such as ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or acetaminophen (Tylenol) can help decrease pain and control fevers. Take ibuprofen with food to avoid an upset stomach.
- **Elevate the affected arm or leg** to help decrease swelling.
- **Cover the infected area** with a clean, dry bandage if you have drainage or areas of open skin.
  - This helps to keep bacteria out and also prevents the spread of infection to others.
  - Change the bandage daily and whenever it becomes wet or dirty.
- **Wash the wound daily** as part of your normal bathing and with dressing changes. Cleanse the area gently with soap and water, and dry well before covering with a bandage.
- **Monitor the infection** to make sure that the redness, pain, and swelling is improving. It is also wise to check your temperature on a regular basis. You should contact your provider if the redness is spreading, your pain is increasing, or you are running fevers 101°F or higher.

## **HOW CAN I PREVENT IT?**

Maintaining good skin hygiene is key!

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water. Proper technique is important:
  - Wet your hands with soap and water, and rub them together for 15-30 seconds (about the time it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice).
  - Pay special attention to the fingernails, the skin between the fingers, and the wrists.
  - Remember to rinse and dry thoroughly.
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are a good alternative if a sink is not available. However, visibly soiled hands should be washed with soap and water.
  - To be effective, hand sanitizers should be rubbed over the entire surface of the hands and wrists until dry.
- Keep your skin well-moisturized.
- Keep your fingernails and toenails trimmed and clean.
- Be careful shaving as fine cuts and openings in the skin can serve as entry points for bacteria. Never use a dull razor or share razors.
- Wear protective shoes and gloves when needed.
- If you have cuts, scrapes, or other areas of open skin, keep them covered while they are healing.
- Do not pick at any peeling or open areas of the skin. Do not try to squeeze or pop any bumps on the skin.
- Adhere to skin care advice following the application of body art, such as piercings and tattoos. Seek medical care as soon as possible if you develop signs of infection.

## **RECOMMENDED WEBSITES**

- [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)
- [www.medicinenet.com](http://www.medicinenet.com)