

CELLULITIS: A PATIENT GUIDE

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WHAT IS CELLULITIS?

- Cellulitis is an infection of the skin and deeper soft tissue of the skin; it can affect any part of your body but commonly affects the legs, feet or hands.
- It is usually caused by bacteria which have entered the skin.
- Symptoms include a sudden or gradual onset of a red, hot and tender area of skin. The affected skin is usually smooth and shiny but can blister.
- Patients with cellulitis would typically feel unwell, with a fever (>37.8 °C) and a single red and painful lower limb

WHY HAVE I GOT CELLULITIS?

RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING CELLULITIS INCLUDE:

- Recent injury to the skin e.g. traumatic wounds, leg ulcers, insect bites
- Fungal or skin infections such as Athlete's foot
- Chronic skin conditions such as eczema or psoriasis
- Excess fluid in the limbs (oedema) due to poor circulation, heart failure, liver disease, or lymphoedema
- Being overweight (obesity)
- Decreased mobility (lack of movement)
- A weakened immune system e.g. due to various drugs or ongoing health conditions
- Intravenous drug abuse
- History of having cellulitis previously

WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

- Cellulitis usually needs treatment with antibiotics
- For **mild cellulitis** affecting a small area of skin; if you are otherwise well, your GP will prescribe antibiotic tablets; your symptoms might get worse in the first 48 hours of treatment, but should then start to improve.
- For **moderate cellulitis** where you are feeling generally unwell or deeper skin tissue is affected; you will usually be advised to attend the hospital by your GP or NHS 111; you may be prescribed intravenous* antibiotics and admitted, to hospital however, if your condition is stable you could avoid admission and be treated by the OPAT team (see attached leaflet).
- For **severe cellulitis** where you feel suddenly very unwell with any ONE of the following symptoms you should attend A&E; Fever ($>37.8^{\circ}\text{C}$), a fast heart beat, cold/sweaty skin, if you feel dizzy or confused or if you develop purple patches on your skin; you will be admitted to hospital for intravenous* antibiotics

* Intravenous (IV) means administered directly into a vein via a specialist vascular access device such as a peripheral cannula or midline

SELF-HELP GUIDANCE

In addition to taking antibiotics as prescribed you can aid recovery by:

- Taking Paracetamol or Ibuprofen for pain (please check medicines guidance before taking any non-prescribed medications)
- Elevate the affected area when sitting or lying down to reduce swelling
- Mobilise the limb small amounts frequently and rest regularly with the limb elevated
- Drink adequately to avoid dehydration
- Keep the area clean and dry at all times
- Do not apply any creams, dressings or fragrances without medical advice
- Maintain a healthy diet

SIGNS OF HEALING AND WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR...

- You should start to feel better within one or two days
- The area of warmth and redness should begin to improve after two or three days but can take a couple of weeks to resolve
- If the affected area becomes more swollen or painful, call your healthcare provider
- If you do not start to feel better after two full days of treatment, call your healthcare provider
- you should routinely be reviewed after 48-72 hours treatment
- The pain may take longer to subside than the infection
- Healing cellulitis can become dry, scaly and itchy; the skin will gradually become a deeper red and eventually turn a purple colour – this is healing and is not a concern unless the warmth, pain and swelling increase

PREVENTING CELLULITIS IN THE FUTURE

If you have developed cellulitis, you are at higher risk of developing it again. There are some simple things that you can do to reduce your chances of developing cellulitis again:

- Keep your skin clean and well moisturised
- Clean cuts or wounds immediately and use antiseptic cream
- Always wear appropriate clothing and footwear to prevent cuts or wounds
- Keep your finger nails short and clean
- Maintain a clean environment at home
- If you are overweight your risk of developing cellulitis is high; please contact your local health provider for support with healthy living and lifestyles or visit <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/>

REFERENCES

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