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Cellulitis

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Condition Basics

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is a common skin infection that happens when bacteria spread through the skin to deeper tissues. Most cases are mild and last several days to a couple of weeks. But cellulitis can sometimes progress to a more serious infection, causing severe illness that affects the whole body (sepsis) or other dangerous problems.

Treatment is needed to help control the infection and reduce symptoms.

Some people are at higher risk for cellulitis, such as those who have diabetes, a weakened immune system, or [edema](#). They also tend to get sicker from cellulitis. And they are more likely to get cellulitis again.

What causes it?

Cellulitis is caused by bacteria, most often strep or staph. You can get infected after any event that causes a break in the skin, such as:

- Surgery.
- A cut or bite.
- A new tattoo or piercing.
- Problems that cause skin breakdown, such as [eczema](#), [psoriasis](#), or a [fungal infection](#) like athlete's foot.

Sometimes cellulitis can occur even if there wasn't an obvious break in the skin.

What are the symptoms?

At first, the infected area will be warm, red, swollen, and tender. If the infection spreads, you may have a fever, chills, and swollen lymph nodes.

Cellulitis can occur anywhere on the body. In adults, it often occurs on the legs, face, or arms. In children, it is most common on the face or around the anus.

How is it diagnosed?

Doctors are often able to diagnose cellulitis based on your symptoms and a physical examination. In most cases, you won't need further testing.

But tests sometimes may be done to find out what's causing your symptoms and to rule out other problems. For example, you may need blood tests, an [ultrasound](#), or an imaging test such as a [CT scan](#) or an [MRI](#).

Find Services and Resources

If you are looking for health services in your community, you can use the HealthLinkBC Directory to find hospitals, clinics, and other resources.

[FIND Services and Resources](#)



How is cellulitis treated?

Cellulitis is treated with antibiotics. If the infection is mild, you may be able to take antibiotic pills at home.

If the infection is severe, you may need to be treated in a hospital so that you can get IV antibiotics directly into your bloodstream, along with any other care you may need.

Be sure to follow your doctor's instructions about medicine and skin care. To help with your recovery and to feel better:

- Take all of your medicine as prescribed. Don't stop taking it just because you feel better. You need to take the full course of antibiotics.
- Elevate the affected area to reduce swelling. Warm compresses may also help.
- Use pain relievers as needed.

How can you prevent it?

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If you are at risk for cellulitis, you can take steps to help prevent it. If you've had cellulitis before, these steps may help prevent it from coming back.

- Take good care of your skin. Keep it clean, and use lotion to prevent drying and cracking.
- Check your feet and legs often. This is especially important if you have diabetes.
- Treat any skin infection right away.
- Ask your doctor if you need to take antibiotics or other medicine on a regular basis to prevent cellulitis.
- If you have edema, ask your doctor about wearing compression stockings or sleeves.


Related Information

- [Skin Changes](#)
- [Swelling](#)

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IS IT AN EMERGENCY?

If you or someone in your care has chest pains, difficulty breathing, or severe bleeding, it could be a **life-threatening emergency**. Call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number immediately.

If you are concerned about a possible poisoning or exposure to a toxic substance, call **Poison Control** now at **1-800-567-8911**.

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