

Cellulitis

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin and the tissues directly beneath it caused by bacteria. Usually *Staphylococcus aureus* (also called Staph) or Group A beta haemolytic streptococcus.

Cellulitis can affect anyone, although you are more at risk if you smoke, have diabetes or have poor circulation.

What causes cellulitis?

Cellulitis can affect most parts of the body and usually occurs in areas of skin that have been damaged.

Bacteria enter the broken or damaged skin and cause an infection in the tissue under the skin. This infection can spread easily. You will need antibiotics to treat the infection.

Areas that typically become infected include:

- Insect bites, burns, abrasions (grazes) or cuts
- Surgical wounds
- Where the skin is disturbed or broken, typically with skin problems such as patches of eczema, psoriasis, scabies or acne
- A foreign object being embedded in the skin, such as metal or glass

Sometimes bacteria enter through undamaged skin. It may not be possible to find an exact cause.

What are the symptoms?

- Redness of the skin
- Warmth, hotter to touch than surrounding skin
- Swelling or tightness of the affected area
- Tenderness or pain in an area of skin
- Discharge, such as leaking of yellow, clear fluid or pus
- Sweats and fevers
- Swollen local lymph glands

Treatment

Antibiotics are needed to treat the infection. How they are given depends on the particular features of the case. Sometimes they are given by mouth (orally – for example, tablets) and sometimes

intravenously (into a vein through a drip). Stronger doses can be given in this way. Intravenous treatment is given in hospital or sometimes at home by a visiting doctor or nurse (through the Cabrini Hospital-in-the-Home service). As the infection improves you will be switched to antibiotics that can be taken by mouth (oral).

Antibiotics are usually needed for a week to 10 days. Make sure you finish the entire course of antibiotics, even if you are feeling better after a few days.

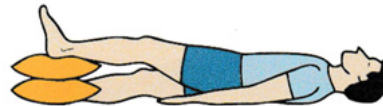
The area of affected skin may be marked with a pen to see whether the infection is spreading or improving.

Your doctor may take a swab from your skin, which will be sent to a laboratory for testing. It can take a few days to get a result. You may also have a blood test.

If your results require follow up the hospital will contact you – it is important to answer phone calls from the hospital in the days following discharge home from Cabrini.

Home care

- Get plenty of rest. This gives your body a chance to fight the infection.
- Raise the area of the body involved as high as possible. This will ease the pain and swelling, help drainage and reduce swelling.



- If you have pain, take simple pain medication such as paracetamol. Check the label for the correct dose. The pain will ease as the infection improves.

Cellulitis is spread by skin-to-skin contact or by touching infected surfaces. Stop the spread by:

- Washing your hands often
- Bathing or showering daily
- Covering any wounds with a gauze dressing (not a band-aid)
- Washing your bed linen, towels and clothing separately from other family members while the infection is healing

What to expect

Most people respond to the antibiotics in two to three days and begin to get better.

Sometimes cases initially treated with oral medication fail to improve and need intravenous medication.

In rare cases, cellulitis may spread into the blood stream. This requires urgent medical treatment and admission to hospital. Symptoms that this may have occurred include high fever, chills and shivers and feeling very unwell or faint. If these occur, return to Cabrini ED urgently.

Follow-up

You may be advised to see the Cabrini ED Review Clinic or your local doctor in a day or two to be sure that the cellulitis is improving. Make sure you attend this appointment.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

You need to see a doctor promptly if you:

- Have a **fever** or high temperature (over 38.5°C in adults) or **chills** (shaking)
- Begin **vomiting**
- Are having **trouble walking**
- Notice the **red area getting much bigger** or if there is a lot of **pus**

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au