



Cellulitis

Please read this information carefully and keep it in a safe place



What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the deep layer of skin (dermis) and the layer of fat and other tissues just under the skin (the subcutaneous tissues).

What causes cellulitis?

The skin is usually a good barrier against infection, however if there is a break in the skin, which may be caused by a cut, skin ulcer, infection, athlete's foot or badly scratched eczema, then bacteria (germs) can get into and under the skin.

A variety of bacteria can cause cellulitis. A tiny cut is all that is needed to let bacteria in. The bacteria then multiply and spread under the skin's surface to form an infection.

Although a cut or graze is found in many cases to be the main cause, sometimes the infection can occur for no apparent reason without the skin being broken.

Who gets cellulitis?

Cellulitis can affect anyone, but you are more likely to get cellulitis if you:

- Have athlete's foot (see below)
- Have swollen legs (for various reasons)
- Are overweight
- Have had cellulitis before
- Have a poor immune system
- Have poorly controlled diabetes

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A common cause of cellulitis is athlete's foot. Athlete's foot is usually a mild fungal infection, but it can cause tiny cracks in the skin between the toes. Bacteria can then get under the skin and travel up to cause a cellulitis in the leg. There is often no sign of infection of the foot.

The cellulitis can be treated, but it may come back if the athlete's foot is not also treated. Unless athlete's foot is looked for, it can easily be missed as the source of the problem.

Itchiness between the toes is the first sign of athlete's foot.

How do I know I have cellulitis?

The affected skin feels warm, , looks red and inflamed, and may be swollen. The infected area may spread and is usually tender. The nearest glands may also swell and become tender; this is because they are fighting off the infection to stop it spreading to other parts of the body.

During cellulitis of the leg, you may see swelling in the glands in the groin. You may also feel generally unwell and have a fever, particularly if the area of infection is large. The lower leg is the most common site for cellulitis to develop but it can affect any area of the skin.

Is cellulitis serious?

Cellulitis can range from a small area of infection, to a large area of spreading infection, covering a big area of skin. This means that cellulitis can range from mild to serious. Without treatment, a 'battle' is fought between the immune (defence) system of the body and the invading bacteria.

Often the body will fight off the bacteria and the infection will clear, but a spreading cellulitis that continues to get worse can be quite worrying.

Because of this, treatment is usually advised as soon as cellulitis is diagnosed to make sure it does not spread and become serious.

What is the treatment for cellulitis?

A course of antibiotic tablets will usually clear cellulitis. Symptoms should soon ease once you start antibiotic tablets, however you may see an initial increase in redness when treatment is started before it starts to fade.

People with more severe cellulitis, or those not improving with antibiotic tablets, may need intravenous antibiotics, which are antibiotics that are administered directly into a vein through a tube.

Tell your community nurse if the area of infection continues to spread or you feel more unwell after you start antibiotics.

Some bacteria are resistant to some antibiotics, so a change in antibiotic may be needed if the infection does not improve with the first antibiotic.

How is the antibiotic injection given?

A cannula (small hollow plastic tube) is inserted into the vein and the antibiotic is given either as a direct injection or as a drip over 30 minutes. The antibiotics may be given up to four times a day and the whole process should take about one hour. The cannula will be left in between visits and secured with a transparent dressing.

How long do I need to have the intravenous antibiotics?

The cellulitis should improve after three to four days, and the treatment can then be given as

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tablets until the infection has cleared up. The community nurse will discuss this with you and assess the cellulitis daily, to see whether it is responding to treatment. If the infection does not improve, you may have to be admitted to hospital.

What can I do to help?

Painkillers such as paracetamol can ease pain and reduce a fever; the community nurse will discuss this with you.

If you have cellulitis of the leg, keep the leg raised when you are resting. This helps to prevent excess swelling, which may also ease pain. 'Raised' means that your foot is higher than your hip, so gravity helps to reduce the swelling. The easiest way to raise your leg is to lie on a sofa with your leg up on a cushion. When in bed, put your foot on a pillow so that it is slightly higher than your hip. The colour changes in the leg may take a long time to settle and does not mean the antibiotics need to continue.

If the cellulitis is in the forearm or hand, a high sling can help to raise the affected area to reduce swelling and pain.

Treat athlete's foot if it is present. As the infection clears and the skin begins to heal, use a moisturising cream to keep the skin supple and moist.

If you have any concerns about your condition or your treatment, please contact your community nurse.

To contact a community nurse, please call the appropriate number below:

Birmingham patients	Solihull patients	South Staffordshire patients
0300 555 1919 Option 2 (24 hours)	0121 717 4333 (24 hours)	0300 124 0347 (24 hours)

If you require this information in another format, such as a different language, large print, braille or audio version, please ask a member of staff or email interpreting.service@uhb.nhs.uk