Cellulitis

This fact sheet is for people who have presented to the emergency department with this condition.

This fact sheet provides general information. If you have specific concerns, speak to your healthcare professional for further information and advice.

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection caused by bacteria that lives on your skin. If a cut, wound or scrape breaks the skin, bacteria can spread into the skin and the surrounding tissue. You can get cellulitis in any part of your body, but usually you get it in your legs.

Symptoms

Watch for these signs:

- pain in the area
- skin redness that worsens over a day or two
- skin feels hot to touch
- skin may appear shiny
- swelling that worsens over a day or two
- wound weeping, where fluid seeps out of the skin (the colour can vary between clear, yellow and or white/bloody pus-like fluid)
- you feel generally unwell, shivery, achy or may develop a temperature.

Causes

Anything that breaks the skin can allow cellulitis to develop. Examples include:

- insect and spider bites
- abrasions
- diseased skin areas such as dry eczema, scabies or acne
- injuries with foreign bodies such as metal, glass or dirt
- after surgery.

Cellulitis is common. There are some things that can make you more prone to cellulitis. For example, if you:

- are elderly
- have swollen legs or are overweight or obese
- have had cellulitis before

- have a weak immune system; for example, if you take steroids or are having chemotherapy
- are pregnant
- have poorly controlled diabetes
- are an intravenous drug user
- have severe eczema or other skin conditions that cause cracks in the skin, such as athlete's foot.

Treatment

Depending on your problems, tests may be done. These can include swabs of wounds. Also, blood tests if you are unwell.

An outline may be drawn around the red area of the cellulitis. This is to check if the infection has stopped spreading. Avoid washing this mark off.

Depending on how bad your cellulitis is, or if you have other medical or mobility problems, you may be treated:

- in hospital
- at home by nurses
- with oral antibiotics.

If you get cellulitis often or severely, your doctor may refer you to a dermatologist or infectious disease specialist.

What to expect

You will probably be given antibiotics. Most people make a full recovery. But the cellulitis will not improve immediately. It takes 12 to 24 hours for the antibiotics to start working. Seek medical attention if you experience any of the following:

- sweats
- a high temperature of 38 degrees or above
- vigorous shaking
- dizziness and confusion
- the cellulitis is worsening or spreading.

Home care

To improve your recovery time, do the following:

- rest at home
- elevate the affected limb to the level of your heart
- avoid walking long distances

- leave dressings intact until you are told to remove them by your doctor or nurse
- wash your hands often
- take your medication as prescribed, making sure you finish the course of antibiotics and appropriate pain medication
- book an appointment with your local doctor two to three days after discharge to review test results and check if the cellulitis is improving.

Preventing cellulitis

Here are some ways you can prevent cellulitis:

- Use moisturisers if your skin is dry and prone to cracking.
- Manage conditions that may increase your risk of cellulitis, like eczema, leg ulcers and lymphoedema.
- Keep cuts, grazes or bites clean. Wash them under running water and cover them with a dressing.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Obesity increases your risk of cellulitis.