



Cellulitis

What is cellulitis? Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the skin that most frequently develops on the lower legs, but can also affect the face, arms and other areas of the body. Without treatment, it can spread to the lymph nodes and bloodstream, and become life-threatening.

How does it occur? Bacteria may enter the body through cracks or openings in the skin such as surgical wounds, cuts or pressure sores. Depending on injury level, people living with paralysis may not feel new cuts or the symptoms themselves, making daily skin checks critical. Cellulitis can also develop on skin with no visible injuries.

Skin conditions like eczema, shingles and even a case of the chicken pox can increase the risk of developing an infection, along with many secondary conditions frequently experienced by people living with paralysis, including chronic leg or arm swelling, diabetes and obesity.

What are the symptoms of cellulitis? Symptoms of cellulitis can include red, swollen and painful skin that is warm and tender to the touch. Some people may also experience blisters or dimpling on the skin. Be careful not to mistake these blisters for a pressure wound; consult a doctor at the first sign of possible infection.

Symptoms that indicate a severe infection include, fever, chills, rapid heart rate, headache, low blood pressure and confusion. For people living with paralysis, autonomic dysreflexia can also serve as a warning sign. It is critical to catch cellulitis before it gets to a level of severity that leads to hospitalization and/or septic shock. Individuals and caregivers should understand how to look for symptoms and monitor skin daily for any changes.

How can I prevent cellulitis? Pay close attention to overall skin condition, monitoring new cuts and any developing pressure sores. Gently wash all surface wounds with soap and water daily and keep covered with clean, dry bandages (coated with a layer of protective cream such as Vaseline) until healed.

Moisturize skin regularly to help prevent cracking, and trim nails carefully to avoid nearby skin damage. Wear well-fitted shoes, checking to make sure there are no signs

of rubbing or swelling of skin. If possible, do mirror checks of hard-to-see areas of the body or ask a caregiver to review daily. If physical sensation is limited in suspected infection areas, ask a caregiver to feel red patches for warmth, an indication of infection. Track changes in new wounds or infections by taking daily photos or using a ruler to measure size progression. Circle new wounds with a marker to better see when red areas spread and the infection grows larger. With any sign of growth or worsening symptoms, consult with a doctor.

How is cellulitis treated? A doctor will diagnose cellulitis during a physical exam. Cellulitis is treated with oral antibiotics or, for more serious infections, intravenously.

Do not dismiss possible infection. Be proactive at the first signs of cellulitis in order to prevent severe infection and sepsis from developing.

Sources: Merck Manual, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mayo Clinic

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