

Cellulitis

What you need to know

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin and surrounding tissues. The most common area of the body to develop cellulitis is the leg.

What causes cellulitis?

Cellulitis is usually caused by a bacterial infection. The bacteria that cause the infection usually live harmlessly on your skin. If you get a break in the skin it allows the bacteria to enter under the skin and cause an infection to develop. A break in the skin can be caused by:

- A cut/graze
- Animal or insect bite
- An ulcer
- Crack in the skin due to a fungal infection (athlete's foot)

Sometimes the break in the skin is so small you cannot see it.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can develop a cellulitis, however a number of health conditions can increase your risk of developing cellulitis, such as:

- being obese (excessively overweight)
- having a weakened immune system
- having poorly controlled diabetes
- having circulation problems
- having lymphoedema (a condition that causes swelling of the arms or legs)
- having untreated athlete's foot or a fungal toenail infection
- intravenous (IV) drug use
- having previous episodes of cellulitis

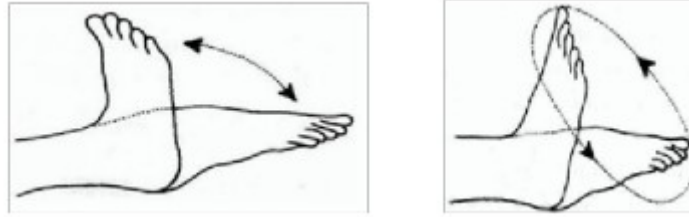
How is your cellulitis going to be treated?

Antibiotics are usually required to treat cellulitis. Antibiotics can be given either by mouth (orally) or directly in to your blood (IV). The method of delivering the antibiotic will depend on how severe the cellulitis is and what other medical conditions you have.

It is important that you complete the course of antibiotics prescribed even if you feel better and the redness is improving.

To help your cellulitis improve you should rest and elevate the affected limb, e.g. place a pillow under the affected leg when lying down or place leg on a chair/foot stool when sitting down. If affecting the arm lift lower arm above the level of the elbow.

To aid circulation however you should go for short walks every now and then and carry out the exercises below regularly when your foot is raised:



Other things that can help cellulitis include:

- Regular pain relief such as paracetamol and ibuprofen
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Good personal hygiene
- Treat any underlying fungal infection

When will my cellulitis get better?

The redness, swelling and pain should start to improve within 48 hours of starting antibiotics. By the end of the antibiotic course (usually 7 to 10 days) most of the bacteria causing the cellulitis will be killed. However inflammation in the skin caused by the infection can take 6 to 12 weeks to settle, so the area may look discoloured and swollen for some time.

When to seek medical advice?

You should seek urgent medical advice if:

- The redness increases beyond the marked area
- The area becomes more swollen or tender
- Red marks start to track up the limb (lymphangitis)
- You develop new flu-like symptoms, feel feverish or confused
- New rash on back, stomach or limbs
- You are no longer able to take the antibiotic orally (due to vomiting or developing a reaction to the antibiotic)

Who to contact if you feel unwell?

If your symptoms are severe (difficulty breathing, fast heart rate, collapse with or without loss of consciousness, confusion, development of severe rash) please call 999. For all other symptoms please call your GP or NHS 24 (available 24 hours per day on telephone number 111).

Aftercare

Once the acute phase has passed and the inflammation is subsiding it is important that you care for your skin to prevent any further problems:

- Wash feet/legs daily in warm water using non-perfumed soap and apply a simple moisturiser
- Check feet regularly for athlete's foot and cracked skin, see a podiatrist if necessary
- As the skin inflammation improves the surface layer may become loose or dry and even peel off. It is important to maintain skin hygiene and moisturise at least twice a day to prevent cracking.