

[◀ Back to Health A to Z](#)

Cellulitis

Cellulitis is a common bacterial skin infection that's treated with antibiotics. It can be serious if it's not treated.

Symptoms of cellulitis

The affected skin appears swollen and red and is painful and warm to touch. If it is not treated, the infection can spread to the lymph nodes and can quickly become life threatening.

You can get cellulitis on any part of your body, but it usually affects:



Hands – causing swollen fingers



Feet– sometimes near toes if you have athlete's foot



Legs – usually the lower legs

Ask for an urgent GP appointment if:

- your face or the area around your eye is affected
- your symptoms are rapidly getting worse
- you have a weakened immune system – for example, because of chemotherapy or [diabetes](#)
- a young child or elderly person has possible cellulitis

Early treatment with antibiotics can stop the infection from becoming more serious.

Causes of cellulitis

Cellulitis is usually caused by a bacterial infection. The bacteria can infect the deeper layers of your skin if it's broken. For example, because of an insect bite or cut, or if it's cracked and dry.

Sometimes the break in the skin is too small to notice.

You cannot catch cellulitis from another person as it affects the deeper layers of the skin.

You're more at risk of cellulitis if you:

- have poor circulation in your arms, legs, hands or feet
- find it difficult to move around
- have a weakened immune system because of chemotherapy treatment or diabetes
- have bedsores or pressure ulcers
- have [lymphoedema](#), which causes fluid build-up under the skin
- inject drugs
- have a wound from surgery
- have had cellulitis before

People who are more at risk of cellulitis should treat [athlete's foot](#) promptly.

Treatment for cellulitis

For mild cellulitis affecting a small area of skin, your GP will prescribe antibiotics – usually for a week.

Your symptoms might get worse in the first 48 hours of treatment but should then start to improve.

It's important to keep taking antibiotics until they're finished, even when you feel better.

Most people make a full recovery after 7 to 10 days.

If your cellulitis is severe, your GP might refer you to hospital for treatment. You will be given fluids and antibiotics intravenously (directly into a vein by injection).

Some people with recurring cellulitis might be prescribed low-dose, long-term antibiotics. This is to stop

infections coming back.

Self-management of cellulitis

As well as taking antibiotics, you can help speed up your recovery by:

- taking paracetamol or ibuprofen for the pain
- raising the affected body part on a pillow or chair when you're sitting or lying down to reduce swelling
- regularly moving the joint near the affected body part, such as your wrist or ankle, to stop it getting stiff
- drinking plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration
- not wearing compression stockings until you're better

You can reduce the chances of getting cellulitis again by:

- keeping skin clean and well moisturised
- cleaning any cuts or wounds, or using antiseptic cream
- preventing cuts and scrapes by wearing appropriate clothing and footwear
- wearing gloves if working outside

Cellulitis complications

If not treated quickly, the infection can spread to other parts of the body, such as the blood, muscles and bones.

Call 999 or 112 or go to your emergency department (ED) if:

you have cellulitis with:

- a [very high temperature](#) or you feel hot and shivery
- a fast heartbeat or fast breathing
- purple patches on the skin
- feeling dizzy or faint
- confusion or disorientation
- cold, clammy, pale skin
- unresponsiveness or loss of consciousness

These are symptoms of sepsis. This can be very serious and life-threatening.

Page last reviewed: 22 March 2021

Next review due: 22 March 2024

This project has received funding from the Government of Ireland's Sláintecare Integration Fund 2019 under Grant Agreement Number 123.

HSE Live - we're here to help

Monday to Friday: 8am to 8pm

Saturday: 9am to 5pm

Sunday: Closed

Bank holidays: Closed

Freephone: [1800 700 700](tel:1800700700)

From outside Ireland: [00 353 1 240 8787](tel:0035312408787)

[HSE Facebook](#)

[HSE Instagram](#)

[HSE TikTok](#)

[HSE YouTube](#)

[HSE LinkedIn](#)

[HSE X \(Twitter\)](#)

[Complaints and feedback](#)

[Emergencies](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Cookie statement](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy statement](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

© Health Service Executive