Cellulitis (skin infection)

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is a skin infection that can affect people of any age. Infections usually improve within a few days of antibiotic treatment. However, infection around the eye can be more serious and requires urgent treatment.

What causes it?

Cellulitis is usually caused by the *Streptococcus* or *Staphylococcus* bacteria.

It is more common in those with:

- skin damage such as grazes, wounds, insect bites or burns
- skin conditions such as eczema, psoriasis or acne
- another skin infection such as chicken pox, school sores or tinea

Signs and symptoms

- area of skin redness, swelling, pain or warmth, usually on the skin of the arms or legs (often around a bite or scratch)
- sometimes a fever (over 38 degrees)
- swelling with a collection of pus (abscess)
- swollen glands (lymph nodes) near the area

Less commonly, the skin around the eyelid can become infected (known as peri-orbital cellulitis). Rarely, infection can occur in the area around the eyeball (known as orbital cellulitis).

Signs of an eye infection include:

- swelling and redness of the eyelid
- double vision
- pain or difficulty with eye movements

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor can usually diagnose cellulitis by looking at the skin. Tests are not needed for mild infections.

Your child's doctor may order swabs and/or a blood test if your child has:

- a severe infection
- fevers
- multiple or recurring abscesses (collections of pus)
- not improved with antibiotics

A child with an eye infection may need an eye scan.

What is the treatment?

Cellulitis is treated with antibiotics. Most children will be given an antibiotic liquid or tablets that can be taken at home.

Children with a more severe infection or an eye infection may require treatment in hospital with antibiotics through a drip (intravenous). These children may need to take an antibiotic liquid or tablets when they go home.

Creams and lotions are not recommended.

Care at home

- Give your child antibiotics as directed by your doctor.
- Wash your hands before and after touching the infected area.
- Encourage your child to rest with the infected area elevated (by putting it up on pillows or cushions) where possible.
- If the area is dirty, clean with salty water. Otherwise keep it as dry as possible.
- Try to keep your child from touching, scratching or injuring the affected area. You may need to cover it with a bandage.
- If required give your child Paracetamol (Panadol) and/or Ibuprofen (Nurofen) for pain relief. Follow the directions on the bottle for the right dose for your child and do not give more than the recommended doses in a day.
- Cover the infected area with a bandage outside the home.

Children with school sores should be kept home from school or day care until the appropriate treatment has begun. If your child does not have school sores, is well and not in pain, they can go to school with the area covered.

Prevention

If you child gets injured, wash any grazes as soon as possible with large amounts of water.

Things to remember

- Cellulitis is a skin infection caused by bacteria.
- Cellulitis usually improves in a few days with antibiotics.
- See your GP if you are concerned about your child's skin.

When should I see a doctor?

See your GP or take your child to the nearest Emergency Department **as soon as possible** if your child has:

- swelling and redness of the eyelid
- double vision
- pain or difficulty with eye movements
- redness or swelling of the skin that is spreading very quickly or is very painful
- symptoms of a skin infection and has a condition which affects the immune system

See your GP if your child has any areas of redness and swelling with pain, warmth or pus (with or without a temperature).

Children diagnosed with cellulitis should see their GP three days after starting antibiotics to have the skin checked. Go back to your GP if the skin still looks red and swollen after finishing the antibiotics.

In an emergency, always call 000 immediately. Otherwise, contact your local doctor or visit the emergency department of your nearest hospital. For non-urgent medical advice, call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) to speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cost of a local call.

Queensland Government