

Cellulitis of the leg

What is it?

Cellulitis is an inflammation due to infection in the skin and the soft tissues underneath. Other people cannot catch it from you.

What are the symptoms?

You may have any of the following:-

- pain,
- swelling,
- redness,
- warmth,
- tenderness,
- fever,
- red streaking beyond the edge of cellulitis.

What causes it?

It usually occurs when there is a break in the skin and the skin itself is unhealthy.

Some common conditions, which can make the skin unhealthy and prone to cellulitis, are:-

- varicose veins with eczema,
- ulcers,
- swelling of the legs due to poor circulation (the movement of the blood around the body).

Some people are more likely to get cellulitis than others, for instance, people with conditions such as diabetes.

Sometimes people cannot keep their feet and legs clean because they are confused or suffer severe stiffness of the joints. These people are also at risk of developing cellulitis.

Cellulitis can also occur after the simplest knock or scrape, or an insect bite, even if the leg appears clean and healthy beforehand.

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Cellulitis of the leg - continued

Can there be complications?

Cellulitis is serious if it begins to spread widely. For instance:-

- the infection can get into the blood stream,
- large blisters can appear, which break down to leave nasty ulcers.

For this reason, cellulitis should be treated promptly by a doctor.

After treatment the condition may appear to settle. However, if the leg becomes hot, red, shiny or begins to blister, you need to tell your doctor at once.

How is it treated?

Treatment is normally only with antibiotics. The first choice is often penicillin. If you are allergic to penicillin, you must tell the doctor at once. In this case another antibiotic will be chosen.

We can treat mild cellulitis with antibiotics taken by mouth.

If your condition does not improve after 48 hours, your doctor may admit you to hospital. Here you can be treated with stronger antibiotics which are injected directly into a vein.

If you develop ulcers, you may need to have dressings on your legs.

Resting your leg up on a stool can help to ease the swelling.

You can find more information about cellulitis on the website:

www.patient.co.uk

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(Written by a consultant geriatrician and checked by volunteer readers)

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