University Hospitals Dorset
NHS Foundation Trust

Lower Leg Cellulitis

Medical Same Day Emergency Care Patient information

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is a skin infection caused by bacteria. It affects the deeper layers of the skin and the tissue underneath. It usually occurs on the lower leg, but it can appear anywhere on the body.

Most people get better with antibiotics. You should start to feel better within two days of starting treatment. The redness and swelling can take a few weeks to fully go away.

What causes cellulitis?

Your skin protects your body from germs. Cellulitis happens when bacteria get through a break or crack in the skin. Sometimes the break is so small you can't see it.

Common causes include:

- Cuts or grazes
- Insect bites
- Cracked or dry skin
- Athlete's foot
- Eczema
- Leg ulcers or other wounds

Sometimes, no break in the skin can be found.

What are the symptoms?

Cellulitis usually affects one leg.

You may notice:

- Redness (on lighter skin) or darker, purple, brown or grey (on darker skin)
- Warm skin
- Swelling
- Pain or tenderness
- Skin that feels tight or hard
- Blisters filled with clear fluid or blood
- Swollen or sore glands in the groin.

The area may spread over a few hours or days.

You might also have:

- A high temperature (fever)
- Shivering or chills
- Flu-like symptoms
- Feeling generally unwell

Is cellulitis serious?

Most people recover fully when treated early.

If not treated, the infection can spread and cause serious problems like:

- Infection in the blood (sepsis)
- Infection in the bone
- An abscess (a pocket of pus)

These problems are rare but can happen.

How is cellulitis treated?

Cellulitis is treated with antibiotics.

Your doctor or Advanced Practitioner will decide if you need tablets or antibiotics through a drip (IV antibiotics)

If the infection is severe, you may need to stay in hospital for a short time.

Remember:

- Take your antibiotics exactly as told
- Finish the full course, even if you feel better
- Don’t stop early unless your doctor says so

Pain relief

Paracetamol can help with pain and fever. Follow the instructions on the packet.

Ibuprofen may help with pain and swelling but check with a doctor first if you have stomach ulcers, kidney problems, asthma or are pregnant.

If your pain is severe or is not improving, speak to your doctor.

Looking after your skin

As your skin heals:

- Keep it clean
- Moisturise daily to stop dryness and cracking
- Use gentle soap or a soap substitute
- Don’t put creams on broken skin unless your doctor says it’s okay

How long does recovery take?

You should start to feel better within two days of starting antibiotics.

Redness and swelling usually improve after two to three days, but your skin may take weeks to return to normal.

You may notice:

- Pain lasting longer than the infection
- Swelling for several weeks
- Dry or itchy skin
- Skin colour changes that fade slowly

This is normal while healing.

Self-care tips

You can help your recovery by:

- Raising your leg when sitting or lying down (keep your foot higher than your hip)
- Resting for the first few days
- Drinking plenty of fluids
- Wearing loose, comfy clothing
- Avoiding scratching
- Keeping skin clean and moisturised
- Finishing your antibiotics

If you wear compression stockings, ask your doctor when it is safe to use them again.

Preventing cellulitis from coming back

You can lower your risk by:

- Moisturising dry skin every day
- Treating athlete's foot quickly
- Cleaning and covering cuts or bites
- Wearing shoes outdoors
- Managing leg swelling
- Checking your feet and legs regularly for cuts, blisters or damaged skin.

When to get medical help?

Contact your GP or healthcare team if:

- You're not improving after two to three days of antibiotics
- You still have a fever after finishing antibiotics
- The redness, swelling or pain comes back after treatment
- You are worried about your recovery or need further advice.

Get urgent medical help (NHS **111**, Emergency Department or call **999** if appropriate) if:

- Redness spreads quickly
- Pain or swelling gets much worse
- You get large blisters or black/numb skin
- You feel confused, very sleepy or hard to wake
- You have trouble breathing
- You're being sick repeatedly
- You have a very high temperature with severe shivering
- You feel much worse even while taking antibiotics.

Contact Details

Medical Same Day Emergency Care (SDEC)

Telephone: **0300 019 4225**

If you have been given **Patient Initiated Follow Up (PIFU)** instructions, please follow them.

If not, contact your GP.

If your GP surgery is closed, call NHS **111**

In an emergency, go to A&E or call **999**

Please note

We don't usually provide paracetamol or ibuprofen to take home, as you can buy these from most pharmacies or supermarkets.

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The Royal Bournemouth Hospital, Castle Lane East, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH7 7DW
Poole Hospital, Longfleet Road, Poole, Dorset, BH15 2JB

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