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Patient information: Cellulitis and erysipelas (skin infections) (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What are cellulitis and erysipelas? — Cellulitis and erysipelas are both infections of the skin. These infections can cause redness, pain, and swelling. The difference between them is that erysipelas tends to affect the upper layers of skin, and cellulitis tends to affect deep layers of skin and sometimes the fat under the skin.

Cellulitis and erysipelas can happen when germs get into the skin. Normally, different types of germs live on a person's skin. Most of the time, these germs do not cause any problems. But if a person gets a cut or a break in the skin, the germs can get into the skin and cause an infection.

Certain conditions can increase a person's chance of getting cellulitis or erysipelas. These include:

- Having a cut (even a tiny one)
- Having another type of skin infection or a long-term skin condition
- Having swelling of the skin or swelling in the body
- Being overweight

What are the symptoms of cellulitis and erysipelas? — Both types of infection cause very similar symptoms. Either infection can cause the infected area to be painful, red, swollen, or warm. Some people with cellulitis or erysipelas can sometimes also have fever or chills. And sometimes, people with these infections have no symptoms or only some of these symptoms.

Most of the time, cellulitis and erysipelas happen on the legs or arms. But people can get these infections in other places, such as the belly, the face, in the mouth, or around the anus.

Will I need tests? — Most people do not need any tests. Your doctor or nurse will do an exam and look at your skin.

It's important for a doctor or nurse to do an exam to figure out what kind of infection you have. The right treatment for a skin infection depends on the type of infection it is and which germs are causing it. Your doctor or nurse might need to do tests to figure out the cause of your infection.

If you have cellulitis or erysipelas, it's important to get treated. These infections can spread to the whole body and become serious if not treated.

How are cellulitis and erysipelas treated? — These infections are treated with antibiotic pills. If your doctor prescribes medicine for you to take at home, it is important to follow the directions exactly. Take all of the pills you are given, even if you feel better before you finish them. If you do not take all the pills, the infection can come back worse.

People who have severe infections might be treated in the hospital with antibiotics that go into the vein (called "IV").

What can I do to help treat my infection? — You can:

- Raise your arm or leg (if your infection is on your arm or leg) to reduce swelling – Raise the arm or leg up above the level of your heart 3 or 4 times a day, for 30 minutes each time.
- Keep the infected area clean and dry – You can take a shower or bath, but be sure to pat the area dry with a towel afterward. Do not put any antibiotic ointments or creams on the area.

Should I call my doctor or nurse? — You should call your doctor or nurse if your symptoms do not get better within 3 days of starting treatment. You should also call if the red area gets:

- Bigger
- More swollen
- More painful

Your doctor or nurse might do another exam or tests to see if you need different medicines.

Can skin infections be prevented? — Sometimes. If you cut your skin, make sure to wash the area well with soap and water. This can help prevent the area from getting infected. If you have a long-term skin condition, ask your doctor or nurse what you can do to help prevent infections.

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