

## Reducing the Risk of Cellulitis Advice Sheet

Following the information and advice within this leaflet may help you reduce the risk of cellulitis.

### What is Cellulitis?

Cellulitis is a skin infection which can affect any area of your body. Cellulitis is caused when a break in the skin (e.g. cut, ulcer, insect bite or dry cracked skin) allows bacteria to enter and cause an infection. Cellulitis is not contagious and rarely affects more than one area of your body at the same time. If both of your legs are red, it is unlikely to be cellulitis



### Signs and Symptoms of Cellulitis

Cellulitis causes a rash or an area such as your arm or leg to become red, feel hot to the touch, and may be tender or painful. You may also develop swelling in the affected area, and you could feel generally unwell as if you have the flu.

If you think you have cellulitis, **seek urgent medical help from your GP**. If you notice these symptoms out of hours, contact your out of hours GP service or 111 (NHS Direct). It is important to act quickly to prevent the cellulitis from getting any worse. You will need antibiotics as soon as symptoms occur and you must take them as prescribed (if you have lymphoedema, this will be for a minimum of two weeks. The extra dose is due to the increased fluid in your tissues).

It is important to note that that cellulitis can increase your risk of developing lymphoedema. Lymphoedema is a condition that causes chronic swelling.

### Are some people more at risk of developing cellulitis than others?

Although Cellulitis is caused by a bacterial infection, there are factors which increase the risk of it occurring.

## What are the risk factors associated with developing Cellulitis?

The risk of Cellulitis is increased if you have:

- Damaged skin, for example dry / cracked skin, scratches and skin conditions such as dermatitis, psoriasis or eczema
- Had a previous episode of cellulitis (in the same area of the body)
- Chronic swelling or oedema (lymphoedema)
- A fungal infection, for example in your toe or fingernail, or athlete's foot
- A high BMI (Body Mass Index / overweight)
- Difficulties maintaining personal hygiene and wearing clean clothes daily (socks, bra's, knickers or pants)
- Diabetes
- Conditions such as varicose veins, previous DVT (Deep Vein Thrombosis) or heart problems
- Issues with your immune system (undertaking chemotherapy)
- Problems with your mobility

## Can you reduce your risk of Cellulitis?

By addressing the risk factors, there is a lot you can do to reduce the risk of cellulitis.

- **Skin Care / hygiene**
  - Wash your skin daily with warm water and soap
  - Dry your skin thoroughly especially between the fingers and toes, paying particular attention to skin creases and folds
  - Apply any moisturising cream to your skin to prevent it from dryness
  - Daily skin care will help you to reduce your risk of infections, such as cellulitis
  - Reduce risk the of sunburn by using a high factor sun cream
  - Use common sense in avoiding cuts and scratches in the garden and with pets, use gloves if appropriate
  - Protect yourself by using an insect repellent if prone to bites
- **Reducing swelling or reducing the risk of swelling**
  - Wear your compression garment if previously provided
  - Keep active and mobile

### Foot care

- When cutting your nails take care not to damage the cuticles and surrounding skin
  - Monitor for fungal infections, for example athlete's foot
  - Monitor for nail fungal infections / ingrowing toenail and if problematic, seek appropriate treatment
- **Weight Management**
    - In order to reduce your risk of cellulitis it is important to eat a good healthy diet and exercise regularly. If you are unsure what a 'normal' weight for you is, you should ask your therapist for more information.

- **Movement and Exercise**

- Gentle movement, exercise and activities will help the muscles pump lymph fluid (the fluid that causes oedema) more effectively through your body. Movement and exercise help you improve and maintain flexibility and keeps your bones strong. Being more active helps you achieve and maintain a healthy weight and it may improve your emotional wellbeing.
- Movement and exercise is not just about going to the gym, activities such as walking on the spot or walking your dog are ideal, as are swimming, cycling, bowling, gardening, housework and even shopping. Basically, move your body more. A more recent form of 'fun' exercise is using a console (Wii, Xbox or similar) with games that allow you to play sports whilst sitting down.
- If your mobility is limited, you can still move your body. Try lifting your arms and legs when in bed or on the chair. Pacing yourself is important. Set yourself personal and achievable goals.
- Sometimes keeping a record of how much activity you do can be beneficial.
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- Try to do a little every day and build up to about 30 minutes of activity / exercise, 5 days a week. If you are used to exercising, it is a good idea to go back to what you had been doing - BUT start gradually and build up on a day to day basis.
- If you go to a gym or exercise class, remember to pace yourself and listen to your body. Discuss your limitations with your instructor so that they can adapt the quantity or intensity of exercise you do if necessary.
- Breathing exercises are also shown to be important in improving lymphatic drainage. Ask your cellulitis therapist for information if you are unsure.
- If you have been shown exercises to do by your therapist, continue with these daily.

- **Managing other medical conditions**

- Ensure diabetes and other long term conditions are well controlled and ensure you attend your hospital check ups

- **Clothing & Footwear**

- Wash your clothes well at the correct temperature to ensure all bugs and bacteria are killed
- Dry your skin thoroughly before dressing to prevent fungal infections
- Ensure clothing does not rub and cause marks on the skin
- Ensure shoes / footwear are fitted correctly and don't rub. Replace footwear regularly to reduce fungal infections.

## Trauma & Injury

Any trauma or injury to an affected area could increase your risk of cellulitis

Treat all cuts, grazes, burns and bites with the following steps:

1. Clean the area well with water
2. Use an antiseptic solution or cream if possible
3. Cover with a sterile dressing or plaster if necessary
4. If in doubt seek medical advice

## Prophylactic Antibiotics

Should you have recurrent episodes of Cellulitis (that is 2 or more cases in a year), you must speak to your GP or Healthcare Professional regarding strategies such long term, low dose antibiotics for a year to reduce the risks of further episodes of Cellulitis.

## Remember reducing your risk of Cellulitis is important

Top tips for Cellulitis prevention:

1. **Skin Care – moisturise your skin**
2. **Increased BMI and weight gain increases risk of Cellulitis**
3. **Move your body - regular activity is very important**
4. **Act fast if you think you have cellulitis and see your GP**

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