Cellulitis and Intravenous Antibiotics

Having your treatment at home in Gateshead

Gateshead Primary Care Trust
South Tyneside Primary Care Trust
Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust
You have been given this leaflet because a doctor has seen you and diagnosed cellulitis. The doctor has prescribed intravenous antibiotic treatment for you to be given at home. The doctor has referred you to the Rapid Response Intermediate Care Team who will contact you at your home within four hours to arrange to visit.

**What is cellulitis?**

Cellulitis is an infection of the deep layer of skin and the layer of fat and tissues just under the skin.

**What causes cellulitis?**

The skin is a good barrier against infection. A break in the skin such as that from a cut, ulcer, injection, scratch or athlete’s foot etc is a way in which bacteria (germs) can get into and under the skin. The skin is the body’s first line of defence and a tiny break is all that is needed to allow bacteria in.

We all have some bacteria that live on our skin which normally do not cause any problems. If your skin is damaged or broken in some way however then the bacteria can get in and multiply then spread along under the skin surface to cause an infection. A small cut or graze etc is found in many cases to be the cause of cellulitis although sometimes the infection occurs without apparent reason when a break in the skin can’t be found.

Various types of bacteria can cause cellulitis.
**Who gets cellulitis?**

Cellulitis is a common problem. It can affect anyone although there are some things that can make you more prone to cellulitis. For example if you:

- have athlete's foot
- have skin abrasions (cuts)
- have swollen legs (for various reasons), or are overweight or obese
- have previously had an episode of cellulitis
- have a poor immune system - for example, if you take steroids or chemotherapy
- have poorly-controlled diabetes
- are an intravenous drug user
- have had an insect bite
- have skin problems such as eczema
What are the symptoms of cellulitis?

The lower part of the leg is the most common site for cellulitis to develop although it can affect any area of the skin.

Affected skin feels warm, may look swollen, red and inflamed. The infected area may spread and it is usually tender. Sometimes blisters occur on the skin.

The nearest glands may swell and become tender. This is because they are fighting off the infection to stop it spreading to other parts of the body. For example, the glands in the groin may swell during cellulitis of the leg.

You may feel unwell and have a fever. Indeed, the first symptom is often to feel feverish and shivery for up to 24 hours before any changes to the skin appear.
Is cellulitis serious?

Cellulitis can range from affecting a small area of skin to being a large, spreading infection affecting a larger area. This means that cellulitis can range from mild to serious.

Without treatment, a 'battle' is fought between the immune system and the invading bacteria.

Often the body can fight off the bacteria and the infection clears but a spreading cellulitis that is getting worse can be worrying.

That is why treatment is usually advised as soon as cellulitis is diagnosed to stop it spreading to become serious.

Possible complications of untreated cellulitis include:

- septicaemia (blood poisoning) which can be life-threatening
- an abscess forming (a ball of pus in the infected area)
- muscle or bone infections which can be serious
- a cellulitis around an eye can spread to infect the brain
- bacteria that get into the bloodstream can cause an infection of the heart valves

With treatment, most people with cellulitis make a full recovery without any complications developing.
What is the treatment for cellulitis?

A course of antibiotic tablets will often clear cellulitis but sometimes more is needed.

If you have severe cellulitis, or have a mild cellulitis that does not improve with antibiotic tablets, then you may need intravenous antibiotic treatment. This is where the antibiotic is injected into a vein.

The doctor thinks that you would benefit from having intravenous antibiotics and that you are well enough to have this treatment at home.

The doctor has referred you to the Rapid Response Intermediate Care Team. One of the nurses from the team will contact you and arrange a time to come to your home to visit you so that your treatment can commence.

If you have been seen in the hospital you will already have had the first dose of your medication. You will also have been given antibiotics to take home with you ready for when the Rapid Response Intermediate Care nurse comes to visit you.

If you have been seen by your GP, they will have left you a prescription so that you can arrange to get the antibiotics before the nurse visits or your GP may have faxed the prescription to the pharmacy store so that they can deliver them to your home. You can only get the antibiotics at the following pharmacy stores:

**ASDA Pharmacy**
Maple Row, Metro Centre, Gateshead NE11 9YA
Tel 0191 461 9510    Fax 0191 461 9511

Monday to Saturday 8am – 10pm
Sunday 11am – 5pm
Don’t worry if you are unable to get the prescription to the pharmacy store as when the nurse phones she will help you arrange this.

Symptoms should soon ease once you start the treatment although there may be an initial increase in redness when treatment is started before it starts to fade.

The nurse will tell you when the Rapid Response Intermediate Care Team will visit again and your doctor will have arranged to see you again also:

Appointment:
Date _________________ Time_________________

If you have had the first dose of your treatment in the hospital the doctor there will also want to see you again to check if your cellulitis is improving so you will need to return to the hospital on:

Appointment:
Date _________________ Time_________________
You should contact the Rapid Response Intermediate Care Team or your doctor sooner however if the area of infection continues to spread or you become worse after you start your antibiotic treatment.

Following treatment with antibiotics, some patients may develop diarrhoea; this can occur up to two/three weeks after finishing treatment. If you develop diarrhoea, it is important that you contact your GP as soon as possible, as the diarrhoea may be caused by an infection called *Clostridium Difficle*, and may need to be treated with a specific antibiotic.

It is important to drink plenty of fluids as diarrhoea can lead to dehydration and you can lose important sugars and minerals from your body. Your doctor may recommend a re-hydration solution, available from your pharmacist. Do not take anti-diarrhoea medication, such as, loperamide (Imodium), as this can make your symptoms worse.

- If you feel sick, try taking small sips of fluid, frequently
- Avoid tea, coffee, carbonated drinks or alcohol
- Always dilute sugary drinks even if you would not normally dilute them
- A simple painkiller like paracetamol can help combat any pain
**What else can help?**

Elevating (raising) the affected body part uses gravity to help prevent excess swelling, which may also ease pain. Do this as much as possible until the infection clears.

If you have a cellulitis of the leg, 'raised' means that your foot is higher than your hip so gravity helps to reduce the swelling. When they are told to elevate a leg, many people put their leg on a chair or foot-stool. This is rarely sufficient (even if the chair reclines) as the ankle has to be higher than the hip for elevation to be useful. The easiest way to raise your leg is to lie on a sofa with your heel up on the arm of the sofa (but avoid pressure on the calf). Or, lie on a sofa with your foot on two or three thick cushions. When in bed, put your foot on several pillows so that it is higher than your hip.

You may need to keep your foot elevated as much as possible for a few days. To aid circulation however you should go for short walks every now and then and wiggle your toes regularly when your foot is raised.

If you have cellulitis in a forearm or hand, a high sling can help to raise the affected area.
Other things that may help include:

- Painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen can ease pain and reduce fever
- Treatment of athlete's foot if it is present
- Using a moisturiser cream and soap substitute on the affected area of skin until it heals to help prevent the skin from becoming dry and damaged
- Drinking plenty of fluids to help prevent dehydration
- Having a tetanus booster vaccination if you have had a cut or dirty wound and your tetanus injections are not up-to-date

**What to look out for**

Most people with cellulitis recover fully without any complications and we have mentioned above the risks associated with not being treated. In addition to these risks you need to look out for the following:

- Pain 'out of proportion' to the look of the skin changes
- Feeling unwell and becoming ill 'out of proportion' to the look of the skin
- Symptoms that get worse rapidly - either skin symptoms, or how you feel generally
- Affected skin that goes dusky, purple or blisters

You should contact your nurse or GP for advice immediately if you notice any of these symptoms.
How can I prevent cellulitis?

Cellulitis may not always be preventable but the following may help to reduce your risk of developing cellulitis in some cases:

• Clean any cuts or wounds that you may have. You can wash them under running tap water. You may want to use an antiseptic cream. You can also cover the cut or wound with a plaster. Make sure that you change the plaster regularly (particularly if it becomes wet or dirty)

• Don't let your skin become too dry. Dry skin can crack easily and bacteria can enter through the skin cracks. Use a moisturiser regularly on your skin

• Avoid scratching your skin if possible. Conditions such as eczema can make skin very itchy. If your fingernails are long, they can cause breaks in the skin when you are scratching. These breaks can be an entry point for bacteria so keep your fingernails short and avoid scratching as much as possible
Who can I contact for further information or if I am worried?

• Your GP can be contacted on

• The Rapid Response Intermediate Care Team can be contacted on 0794 9575 313