You are more at risk of cellulitis if you:

- Have poor circulation in your arms, legs, hands, or feet, for example, because you are overweight.
- Find it difficult to move around.
- Have a weakened immune system, for example, because of chemotherapy treatment or diabetes.
- Have lymphoedema, which causes fluid build-up under the skin.
- Have a wound from surgery.
- Have had cellulitis before.

Can I apply compression garments if I have cellulitis?

Compression is likely to be extremely painful until the worst of the inflammation has subsided, but then it can be reapplied within comfort levels.

Complications of cellulitis and when to seek emergency help

These are symptoms of serious complications, which can be life threatening:

- A very high temperature, or you feel hot and shivery.
- A fast heartbeat or fast breathing.
- Purple patches on your skin, but this may be less obvious on brown or black skin.
- Feeling dizzy or faint.
- Confusion or disorientation.
- Cold, clammy, or pale skin.
- Unresponsiveness or loss of consciousness.

Cellulitis commonly only affects one leg so it can become confused with other conditions such as 'red-leg syndrome'. Red legs are an inflammatory condition associated with Venous disease and usually only affects one leg at a time. The legs appear red, may feel warm and tender but they are not infected and do not require antibiotic treatment.

If you have any concerns please contact:

Hospital .....

Outpatients .....

Clinical nurse specialist .....

GP Surgery .....

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Cellulitis

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What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is a common infection of the skin and the soft tissues underneath. It happens when bacteria enter a break in the skin and spread. The result is infection, which may cause swelling, redness, pain and warmth. The area usually looks red, but this may be less obvious on brown or black skin. You may also get blisters or swollen glands and feel generally unwell.

Cellulitis can appear on almost any part of the body. It usually shows up on damaged skin such as wounds, dirty cuts, and areas with poor circulation. It needs to be treated by a Healthcare professional; antibiotics must always be prescribed.

What causes cellulitis?

Cellulitis is usually caused by a bacterial infection.

The bacteria can infect the deeper layers of your skin if it is broken, for example, because of an insect bite or cut, or if it is cracked and dry.

Sometimes the break in the skin is too small to notice.

You cannot catch cellulitis from another person, as it affects the deeper layers of the skin.

Common symptoms include:

- Redness
- Red streaks
- Swelling
- Warmth
- Pain or tenderness
- Leaking of yellow, clear fluid or pus
- Blistering of the skin

For mild cellulitis affecting a small area of skin, a doctor will prescribe antibiotic tablets – usually for a week.

Your symptoms might get worse in the first 48 hours of treatment but should then start to improve.

Contact a GP if you do not start to feel better 2 to 3 days after starting antibiotics.

It is important to keep taking antibiotics until they are finished, even when you feel better.

Most people make a full recovery after 7 to 10 days.

If cellulitis is severe, you might be referred to hospital for treatment.

How is cellulitis diagnosed?

Your healthcare professional may know you have cellulitis by looking at and feeling your skin. Tell them how long you have had symptoms, and if anything helps to improve them. Tell them if you have ever had a cellulitis infection. You also may need any of the following tests:

- Blood tests. A raised white cell count will support the diagnosis of infection.
- A swab from the infected area or fluid from a blister can be sent for culture to reveal what type of germ is causing the infection and guide the use of the correct antibiotics.
- A sample of tissue (called a biopsy) will help to confirm the diagnosis or possibly reveal other causes of the inflammation.
- An x-ray, ultrasound, CT, or MRI. This may show if the infection has spread. You may be given contrast liquid to help the infection show up better in the pictures. Tell the healthcare provider if you have ever had an allergic reaction to contrast liquid. If you need an MRI scan you must tell the staff if you have any metal in or on your body including jewellery, piercings, joints, or pacemakers.

Self-care at home

While cellulitis can be treated with antibiotics, there are also some helpful things that you can do at home. If you have cellulitis on your leg or arm, raise the affected limb above your heart and prop it up with some pillows. Elevating helps decrease swelling and encourages faster healing. Keep the affected area clean and dry. Washing and cleansing the area is ok but be very gentle with the skin, patting it dry. Do not rub the area as doing so may irritate the skin and do not use antibiotic cream or ointment on the affected area.

Helpful tips:

- Take paracetamol or ibuprofen for the pain.
- Raise the affected body part on a pillow or chair when you are sitting or lying down, to reduce swelling.
- Regularly move the joint near the affected body part, such as your ankle, to stop it getting stiff.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.

You can reduce the chances of getting cellulitis again by:

- Keeping skin clean and well moisturised.
- Cleaning any cuts or wounds and reporting to your healthcare professional.
- Give extra attention to feet and toes in cleaning to reduce fungal infections.
- Preventing cuts and scrapes by wearing appropriate clothing and footwear.
- Wearing gloves if working outside.