



Bacterial Skin Infections

How do people get skin infections?

Many different types of bacteria are commonly found on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. These bacteria may cause an infection when a break in the skin gives the bacteria a place to grow (such as a scratch or insect bite). Some of these bacteria are *Staphylococcus* (also known as “staph”), *Streptococcus*, and *Pseudomonas*.

How to prevent skin infections:

When you first notice a break in your skin, wash it with soap and running water, and then put a clean, dry bandage over it. Change the bandage if it becomes wet, dirty, or loose. Keeping your skin clean and free from contamination will help to prevent skin infections.

What do skin infections look like?

Skin infections may appear in any of these manners:

- **Cellulitis:** Skin becomes inflamed and is usually red and sore
- **Impetigo:** Blistered sores or irritated skin with a honey-colored crust or scab
- **Folliculitis:** infection of a hair follicle (where the hair comes out of the skin)
- **Furunculosis:** Deeper infection below a hair follicle that presents as a painful lump (boil)
- **Carbuncle:** Many hair follicles close together are infected (may have several lumps)
- **Abscess:** a tender pus-filled mass below the skin's surface
- **Infected laceration:** a cut or scratch that becomes infected

Keep wounds clean, and keep drainage away from other people and surfaces.

How should skin infections be treated?

- Skin infections are usually mild. Most can be successfully treated with basic wound care. Keep the area clean and protected with a bandage.
- It is very important to keep all wound drainage controlled. Pus from infected wounds can contain bacteria and spread infection. Good hand hygiene after touching or caring for the wound is important in stopping further infections.
- If infections keep occurring and basic treatment is not helping, a health care provider may drain the pus and/or prescribe antibiotics. If you are given antibiotics, it is very important to take all the medicine exactly as prescribed.
- Incorrect use of antibiotics has caused some bacteria to become drug-resistant. When these drug-resistant bacteria cause infections, fewer antibiotics are effective and they are usually more expensive.

Good hand hygiene:

- **When your hands are dirty, wash them with soap and warm running water.**
- **Count to 20 while sudsing to give the soap a chance to work.**
- **Use alcohol-based hand gel if your hands are contaminated but not visibly soiled.**

How serious are skin infections?

Skin infections that only involve the skin are usually mild. Though it is rare, some bacteria can cause severe illness even when treated quickly and can cause severe diseases (such as bloodstream infections) or death. Therefore, it is very important for skin infections that are not improving to be examined by a health care provider.

How can skin infections spread from person to person?

Skin infections are almost always spread by direct contact with an infected person. They are not spread through the air. Touching surfaces that have been contaminated by a person with a bacterial infection can also spread infection. This is known as indirect contact.

What can be done to prevent spread of skin infections to others?

You can prevent spreading skin infections to your family members and others by following these steps:

1. Keep any skin infection sites covered at all times with clean, dry bandages, especially if pus or drainage is present.
2. Wash your hands often, especially after touching the area of infected skin. Advise your family and others to wash their hands more often, especially if they touched the affected area or any items that had contact with it.
3. Wear disposable latex or vinyl gloves if you are caring for a skin infection other than your own. Always remove and dispose of gloves immediately and wash your hands with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand rub.
4. Do not share personal items such as towels, washcloths, razors, clothing, or uniforms that may have had contact with pus or drainage.
5. Wash soiled bed linens and clothes with hot water (at least 160°F), laundry detergent and (when possible) bleach. Using the hottest setting on your clothes dryer (commercial dryers are hottest) instead of air-drying will help kill bacteria.
6. Put all bandages or items with any pus or drainage (including blood and nasal discharge) immediately into the trash.
7. Clean all possible contaminated surfaces with a commercial disinfectant or with a 1:100 solution of diluted bleach (one tablespoon household bleach in one quart of cool water, or 1/4 cup bleach in one gallon of cool water). This solution must be mixed daily to be effective.
8. Tell all health care providers who treat you that you have a skin infection.



**Performing careful, frequent hand hygiene is the most important action
you can take to prevent the spread of infection!**



Resources:

1. CDC: Community-Associated Information for the Public, August 2003, accessed on 23 May 2006 at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_mrsa_ca_public.html.
2. County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services: Fact Sheet for Health Care Providers: Community-Associated Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* Skin Infections, 03/20/2003, accessed on 20 August 2004 at http://lapublichealth.org/acd/docs/CAMRSA_ProviderFactSheet.pdf.
3. CDC: Guidelines for Hand Hygiene in Health-Care Settings, MMWR 2002; 51 (No. RR-16), accessed on 20 August 2004 at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5116a1.htm>.