Recognizing and following up on cellulitis

A new area of warm, swollen, tender or discolored skin needs prompt medical assessment. Cellulitis is a bacterial infection that affects the skin and the tissue underneath it.

Cellulitis is a common bacterial infection that affects the skin and the soft tissue underneath. It occurs when bacteria, most often streptococcus or staphylococcus, enters through a break in the skin. Cellulitis causes swelling, redness, pain and warmth, and can affect nearly all parts of the body. In adults, signs of cellulitis are most common on the skin of the lower legs. If left untreated, cellulitis can spread to the lymph nodes and bloodstream and become life-threatening.

Signs of cellulitis can usually be observed around the damaged area of skin where the infection began. Wounds in areas with poor circulation, and those that have not been cleaned sufficiently, are more likely to result in cellulitis. The most common cellulitis symptoms — redness, swelling and tenderness — present on the skin itself, but some people may also experience other symptoms of an infection, including fatigue, chills, cold sweats, shivering, fever and nausea. Cellulitis blisters, lethargy, drowsiness and red streaks may indicate that the infection is spreading.

Orbital cellulitis is an infection of the fat and muscles around the eye. It is a serious condition that can lead to blindness if not treated immediately.

Orbital cellulitis symptoms may include:

- Painful swelling of upper and lower eyelids
- Bulging eyes
- Decreased or double vision
- Pain when moving the eye
- Fever
- Difficult eye movements
- Shiny, red or purple eyelids

Cellulitis is relatively common, affecting approximately 14.5 million people in the United States, and there are quite a few factors that may increase a person's risk of developing the infection, including:

- Age — children and the elderly are more susceptible to cellulitis
- Obesity
- Leg issues
- Previous or recurrent cellulitis
- Exposure to environmental factors
- Skin conditions that cause breaks in the skin
- Lymphedema
- Diabetes
- Weakened immune system
- Circulatory problems
- Recent surgery or injury
- Intravenous drug use

Symptoms Of Cellulitis

There are several skin conditions — erysipelas, dermatitis and abscesses — that share many of the signs and symptoms of cellulitis, which can sometimes lead to misdiagnosis. Like cellulitis, erysipelas is caused by bacteria getting into the body through an open spot in the skin, but the appearance of the infected area is usually different. One of the most distinctive cellulitis symptoms is a raised border around the rash that makes it stand out from the skin around it. Abscesses, also caused by bacteria getting into the body, share some cellulitis symptoms but are characterized by lumps under the skin. Though dermatitis can sometimes look like a cellulitis rash, it is not caused by bacteria and is treated with creams and antihistamines rather than antibiotics.

In most cases, doctors will be able to make an accurate diagnosis simply by looking at the cellulitis symptoms, but they may sometimes suggest blood tests or biopsies to rule out other possible conditions.

Cellulitis Complications

In most cases, signs and symptoms of cellulitis disappear within several days after the patient begins an antibiotic regimen, but serious complications are possible, including:

- Permanent swelling — Recurrent cellulitis may damage the lymphatic drainage system and cause chronic swelling of the affected area.
- Blood infection and sepsis — If left untreated, the bacteria that caused cellulitis can get into the bloodstream and lead to sepsis, a serious and life-threatening condition.
- Infection in other regions – The bacteria that caused cellulitis can infect other parts of the body, including muscles, bones or heart valves. This cellulitis complication is rare but requires immediate medical treatment.

Cellulitis complications can be very serious and can cause long-term damage like tissue death, amputation, shock or even death. To avoid complications, alleviate cellulitis symptoms, and minimize the risk of recurrent cellulitis, it is critical for people to seek medical attention if they see any signs of cellulitis.

What Is The Best Path To Cellulitis Recovery

Cellulitis commonly needs antibiotics. Recurrence, spreading symptoms, an open wound or another medical condition can complicate recovery. Get prompt assessment and an individual follow-up plan.

When cellulitis occurs alongside diabetes, a wound or poor circulation, ask how those problems will be managed together. Get the recheck date and instructions for spreading redness, fever or rapid worsening.

Archived recovery account

This account describes care in an earlier setting. The course, timing and outcome belong to that individual.

The patient fell in the bathroom and had to be taken to the hospital, where his condition rapidly deteriorated and he had to be placed on a ventilator. Additional complications presented even greater challenges to overcome, including septic shock brought on by cellulitis and pneumonia. Unable to take anything by mouth, the patient had to be given a feeding tube as well and he remained at the general hospital until he had been stabilized and was ready to be transferred to the treating hospital for respiratory therapy and rehabilitation.

Right from the start the patient was very motivated, even though he experienced a few setbacks along the way. His respiratory therapists worked with him to strengthen his lungs and successfully liberated him from the ventilator. The patient was also assisted by his speech pathologist to relearn how to swallow and use his voice again after the breathing tube was removed. His nurses, assistants and physicians oversaw his recovery from cellulitis and pneumonia and administered medical care. His physical and occupational therapists helped the patient begin to regain his independence through strengthening and mobility exercises, and by the time he was discharged from the treating hospital the patient was back up on his feet, able to walk with a rolling walker and gaining more strength and mobility every day.

Before discharge he described how the respiratory team and other caregivers checked on him, encouraged him and made difficult days easier.

Talk with Lakeview

For questions about a possible stay, call Lakeview Admissions at (262) 534-8509. During a stay, ask the bedside nurse who can help with your question.