Skin Infection: Cellulitis

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin and the tissue under it caused by bacteria. This infection is serious and needs to be treated right away. Without treatment the infection can damage skin tissues and spread quickly to other parts of your body. A skin infection that is not treated right away may lead to:

- Infection in your blood
- Tissue death (gangrene) and possible loss of a body part (amputation)
- Infection in your eyes, causing blindness
- Infection in your brain (meningitis)
- Death

What is the cause?

Several different types of bacteria can cause cellulitis. The bacteria get into the body through a cut, bite, or sore.

You are more likely to get cellulitis if you have a medical condition, like diabetes or HIV/AIDS, that makes it hard for your body to fight infection.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- Redness, swelling, and skin that feels hot to the touch
- Extreme tenderness or pain
- Red streaks that spread away from the wound or sore
- Pus-filled sores
- Swollen and tender lumps in the neck, armpits, or groin
- Fever

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Tests may include:

- Tests of a sample of pus
- A biopsy, which is the removal of a small sample of infected tissue for testing
- Blood tests
- X-rays

How is it treated?

The infection is treated with an antibiotic. If you are taking an antibiotic by mouth, your provider may want to see you or talk to you 1 or 2 days after your first visit to make sure the medicine is working. If the infection does not get

better, or if the infection is severe, you may need to stay in the hospital to receive antibiotics through an IV.

If you have a sinus infection that is causing cellulitis around your eye, you may need surgery to drain the infection from your eye socket and sinuses.

How can I take care of myself?

- Take your antibiotic medicine for as long as your healthcare provider prescribes, even if you feel better. If you stop taking the medicine too soon, you may not kill all of the bacteria and you may get sick again.
- Ask your healthcare provider how to care for the infected area. For example, your provider may recommend keeping the infected area up on pillows (above the level of your heart) when you sit or lie down to decrease swelling and pain.
- Put a warm, moist towel on the reddened area.
- Take pain medicine as directed by your provider.
- Ask your provider:
  - How and when you will hear your test results
  - How long it will take to recover
  - What activities you should avoid and when you can return to normal activities
  - What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.
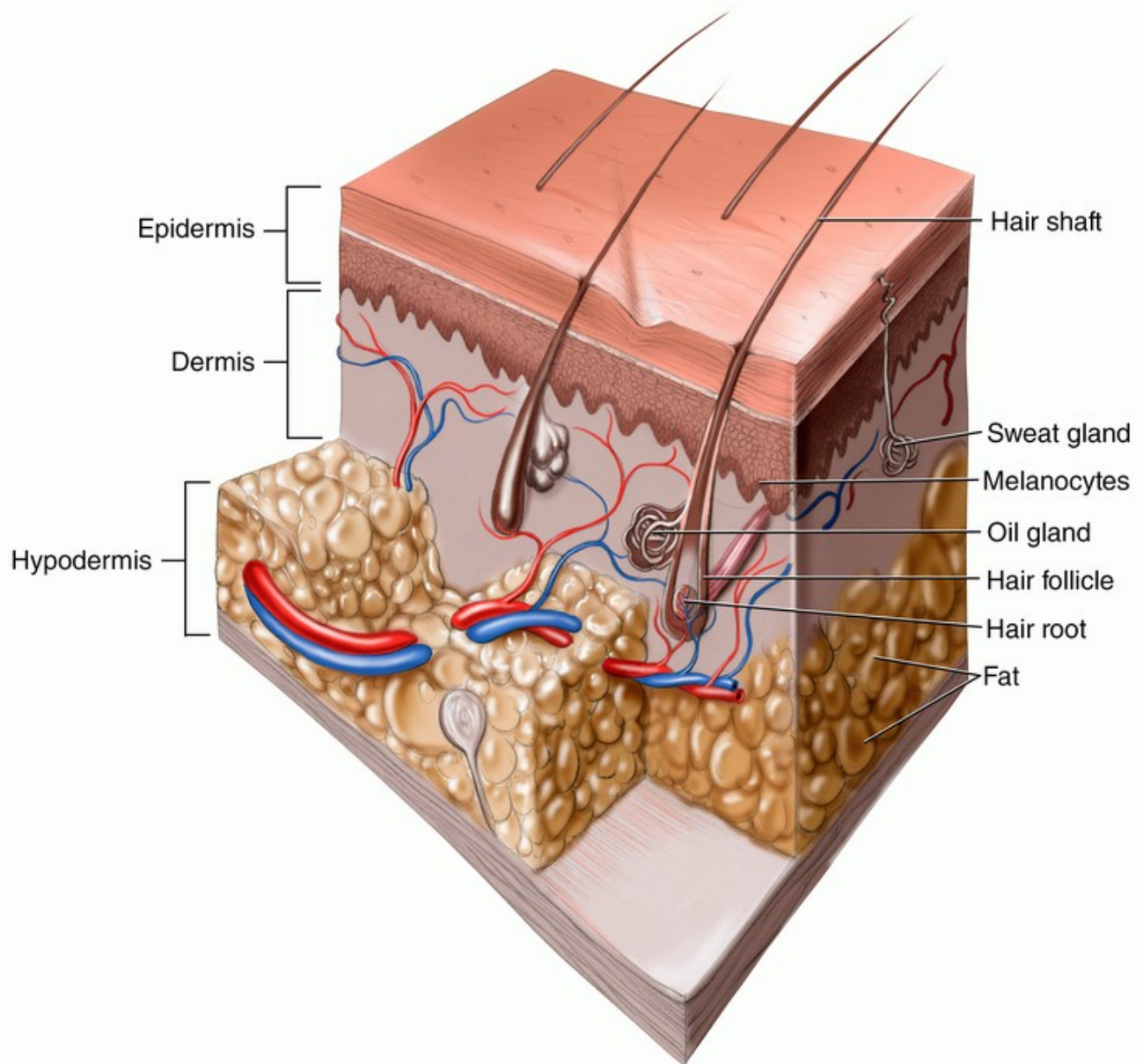
How can I help prevent cellulitis?

- Clean cuts, scrapes, and other skin injuries well with soap and water.
- Keep wounds and sores clean and dry. You may need to cover some wounds with a bandage to keep them clean and dry. Change bandages every day, Change them more often if they get dirty or wet.
- See your healthcare provider for treatment as soon as possible if a wound or sore shows signs of infection. Signs of infection include new or worse redness, swelling, pain, warmth, or drainage from the wound.
- If you have diabetes, follow your provider's instructions for good skin care and keep your blood sugar under good control.

Developed by RelayHealth.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

Skin: Cross Section

Epidermis

Dermis

Hypodermis

Hair shaft

Sweat gland

Melanocytes

Oil gland

Hair follicle

Hair root

Fat