

Impetigo

What is impetigo?

Impetigo is a skin infection caused by bacteria. It is more common in children than in adults. Impetigo is usually a mild infection but it can spread and cause serious illness if it is not treated.

What is the cause?

Impetigo is caused by bacteria. The 2 types of bacteria that cause the infection are called *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Streptococcus pyogenes* (group A streptococcus). These bacteria can live on your skin without hurting you. However, if they get into the deeper layers of the skin through a wound, scratch, or scrape, they may cause an infection.

Impetigo is more likely to happen if you have a chronic skin condition like eczema, or when you have a scratch, scrape, insect bite, or other skin irritation that causes a break in the skin. Impetigo is more common when it is hot and humid. It is very contagious. Physical contact, including scratching, can spread the infection to other parts of the body or to other people. It can also be spread by contaminated clothing, athletic equipment, towels, bed linen, and toys.

What are the symptoms?

Impetigo can occur on any area of skin. It often appears on the face between the upper lip and nose. The infection begins as small blisters. The blisters form pus inside and then break open. The pus from the blisters dries as a gold or yellow-colored crust. The blisters or sores are painless.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will look at the blisters or sores on your skin. Impetigo can often be diagnosed without any tests. In some cases your provider may use a swab to get a sample of fluid from one of the sores. Tests of the sample can then be done to identify the bacteria and find which antibiotics will work best to treat the infection.

How is it treated?

The treatment depends on your age and the severity and type of infection that you have. If the infection is mild, all you may need to do is keep your skin clean so the infection can heal on its own. Your healthcare provider may prescribe an antibiotic ointment to put on your skin.

You may need to put some of the antibiotic ointment inside your nose. Some people carry the bacteria inside their nose and the infection may come back if the nose is not treated. Ask your healthcare provider if this applies to you.

For larger or more serious infections, your provider may prescribe an oral antibiotic medicine or give you a shot of antibiotic medicine.

How long will the effects last?

The sores should start to heal within 2 to 5 days after you start using an antibiotic. If you are taking an oral antibiotic, the infection usually stops being contagious after 24 hours of treatment. If you are using an antibiotic ointment instead, the sores will no longer be contagious when they stop oozing and are drying up.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow these tips to ease the discomfort of impetigo:

- Gently wash the infected area with antibacterial soap. Soak the area for 15 to 20 minutes in warm soapy water. Then gently remove the crusts. Wash any washcloths or towels you use in hot water separately from other laundry.
- Cover the sores with a gauze bandage to keep the infection from spreading and to prevent scratching.
- Shave around sores, not over them.
- Avoid touching the sores more than necessary.

If your provider prescribed an antibiotic ointment, gently pat your skin dry after you wash the infected area and put a thin layer of antibiotic ointment on it with a cotton swab (Q-tip®). Do not touch the tube of antibiotic ointment to the infected area. Also do not touch the ointment tube with the used cotton swab. If you need more ointment, use a new cotton swab. Do not use the ointment more often than directed. Wash your hands thoroughly after using this medicine.

If your provider prescribed an antibiotic to take by mouth, take all of it exactly as directed by your provider. If you stop taking the medicine too soon, the infection may not be completely gone yet or it may return.

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions. 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 your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- 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 impetigo?

- Wash cuts and scratches, insect bites, or other breaks in the skin with warm water and soap right away to prevent infection. Cover the area with a bandage.

- Wash your hands and under your fingernails often with warm water and soap for at least 15 seconds.
- Do not share washcloths, towels, clothing, bath water, or personal items like razors or combs.
- Avoid sharing athletic equipment, such as football pads, as much as possible.
- Use hot, soapy water to wash clothes and linens. Dry clothes on the hot setting if you use an automatic dryer.
- Shower or bathe using soap every day and after strenuous exercise.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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