Skin or Soft Tissue Abscess

What is a skin or soft tissue abscess?

An abscess is a pocket of infected fluid with a thick wall around it.

What is the cause?

Abscesses in the skin, or in the soft tissues under the skin, happen when bacteria get into tissue below the outer layer of skin. Most of the time the bacteria enter a break in the skin. For example, an abscess might develop when a hair becomes ingrown or when the skin is scratched or poked with something sharp. As more bacteria grow (multiply) in the skin or soft tissues, the body responds by forming a wall around the area to help keep the bacteria from spreading to other parts of the body. The bacteria in this pocket continue to multiply and as they do, the pocket becomes more swollen. Some of the bacteria may get through the wall and cause an infection of the tissues around the abscess or even get into the blood and infect other parts of the body. Infection in the blood can be fatal.

Often abscesses occur when hair follicles or sweat glands get infected or after minor scrapes or puncture wounds.

Abscesses are more common in people who have diabetes or poor circulation, and in people whose immune systems are weakened.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of an abscess in the skin or soft tissues are:
· Swelling
· Redness
· Rounded, raised "head" like a pimple
· Pain
· Warmth in the area of the abscess
· Drainage of pus or other fluid

If the infection is spreading to other parts of the body, the redness may spread toward the center of your body and you may have a fever, body aches, and tiredness.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and examine the area that is red and swollen.

How is it treated?

Usually your healthcare provider will treat the abscess by cutting it open and draining it. This is called an incision and drainage, or I&D. The abscess has to be

cut open and drained because the thick wall around it will not let antibiotics get through to fight the infection.

When an I&D is done, first your healthcare provider cleans the skin over the abscess and injects an anesthetic into the skin to make it numb. He or she then cuts open the abscess, and the pus drains out. This drainage of pus often decreases the pain right away because it relieves the pressure caused by the fluid.

Your healthcare provider then packs the pocket with gauze. One end of the gauze is in the abscess and the other end is left sticking out through the cut in the skin. This allows the pus that forms in the abscess to drain out. It also prevents the skin from healing back over the abscess and sealing it off again. The gauze packing is changed every day or two. Your body will fill in the pocket where the abscess was from the bottom up to the top of the skin with new tissue. Once the abscess is filled in, the packing is removed for the last time and the skin is allowed to heal and close up.

You should not open or squeeze an abscess yourself. This can make the infection worse or cause it to spread.

Sometimes draining the abscess is the only treatment needed. At other times, especially when it looks like the infection may be spreading beyond the abscess area, antibiotics will be given as well.

How long will the effects last?

The time it takes for an abscess to heal depends on how big it is and where it is. It also depends on what other health problems you have. Sometimes it takes only a couple of days, but sometimes it takes weeks.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your healthcare provider's instructions for taking care of the abscess at home.
- If your provider prescribes antibiotics, take them exactly as you are directed.
- If the gauze comes out before it is supposed to, you may need to visit your provider to get it replaced so the skin does not heal shut too soon.
- If you have medicine for pain, make sure to take it before you see your health provider to get the abscess repacked. It may hurt a little to take the gauze out and replace it.

How can I help prevent a skin or soft tissue abscess?

- Clean your skin with warm water and soap as soon as possible after you are scratched, cut, or poked. Cover the area with a clean, dry bandage until it is healed. Change the bandage every day or more often if you have drainage.
- Practice good personal hygiene. Bathe or shower daily or after strenuous activity.
- Avoid sharing personal items like towels or razors.

- If you think you may be developing an abscess, see your healthcare provider as soon as possible. Do not open or squeeze an abscess yourself. This can cause the infection to get worse.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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