



Understanding Cellulitis

Recognizing, Preventing, and Responding to Skin Infections

A Patient Education Guide from Aetherus Wound & Lymphatics

Cellulitis Is Treatable—Especially When It's Caught Early

If you have lymphedema or chronic swelling, you've probably heard your healthcare provider mention cellulitis. While the name may sound unfamiliar, cellulitis is simply a bacterial infection of the skin and the tissues beneath it. Left untreated, it can spread quickly and lead to serious complications. The encouraging news is that cellulitis is highly treatable when recognized early.

Understanding what cellulitis is—and what it isn't—is one of the most important things you can do to protect your health. This guide will help you recognize the early signs of infection, understand why people with lymphedema are at increased risk, and learn practical ways to reduce that risk every day.

Why Lymphedema Increases the Risk of Infection

Your lymphatic system does much more than manage fluid. It also plays an essential role in your immune system by helping remove bacteria, viruses, and other harmful substances from your tissues.

When lymphedema is present, that natural defense system doesn't work as efficiently. Protein-rich fluid can collect within the tissues, creating an environment where bacteria can grow more easily. At the same time, swelling places stress on the skin, making it more prone to small cracks or injuries that allow bacteria to enter.

Many people are surprised to learn that the opening allowing bacteria into the skin may be almost impossible to see. A tiny scratch from a pet, a mosquito bite, dry cracked skin, or even a small cut from trimming your nails may be enough to trigger an infection.

Fortunately, understanding these risks allows you to take steps that significantly reduce the likelihood of cellulitis.

Recognizing the Early Warning Signs

One of the challenges with cellulitis is how quickly it can develop. Many patients describe feeling perfectly normal in the morning, only to notice increasing redness, warmth, or flu-like symptoms later that same day.

The affected area often becomes red, warm, swollen, and tender to the touch. The redness may spread beyond its original location over several hours. Some people also develop fever, chills, fatigue, or body aches before they notice obvious skin changes.

Unlike normal swelling associated with lymphedema, cellulitis usually feels different. Pain often increases, the skin becomes noticeably warmer, and many patients report that they simply "don't feel right."

These early symptoms should never be ignored.

Warning Signs That Need Prompt Medical Attention

Seek medical care immediately if you notice:

- Rapidly increasing redness
- Skin that feels hot to the touch
- Fever or chills
- Increasing pain or tenderness
- Red streaking on the skin
- Sudden increase in swelling
- Drainage or pus from an open area
- Feeling unusually tired or ill

Important

If you think you may have cellulitis, do not wait to see if it improves on its own. Early treatment with antibiotics is often the difference between a simple outpatient treatment and hospitalization. When in doubt, contact your healthcare provider the same day.

Preventing Cellulitis Starts with Healthy Skin

Although cellulitis cannot always be prevented, daily skin care dramatically reduces your risk.

Healthy skin acts as your body's protective barrier. When the skin becomes dry, cracked, or injured, bacteria have an easier path into deeper tissues.

Simple daily habits—such as moisturizing dry skin, treating cuts promptly, protecting your feet, wearing gloves while gardening, and using insect repellent when outdoors—can make a meaningful difference over time.

Think of skin care as preventive medicine. The few minutes you spend caring for your skin each day may help prevent a much more serious infection later.

What Should You Do If You Think You Have Cellulitis?

If you develop symptoms that concern you, don't panic—but don't delay either.

Contact your healthcare provider as soon as possible. Describe your symptoms, when they began, and whether you've had cellulitis before. If your provider recommends immediate evaluation, it's important to follow that advice promptly.

While waiting to be seen, you may be instructed to rest, elevate the affected limb, and avoid strenuous activity. Continue following your provider's guidance regarding compression garments, as recommendations may vary depending on the severity of the infection.

Never begin leftover antibiotics or medications that were prescribed for someone else. The correct antibiotic depends on the type of infection and your individual medical history.

Can Cellulitis Come Back?

Unfortunately, yes.

Once someone has experienced cellulitis, the risk of future infections increases, particularly if underlying swelling remains untreated. Each infection can place additional stress on the lymphatic system, making swelling more difficult to manage over time.

This is one reason why long-term lymphedema management is so important. Compression therapy, skin care, exercise, weight management, and regular follow-up visits all work together to reduce your future risk.

Rather than viewing cellulitis as a one-time event, think of it as a reminder that your lymphatic system needs ongoing support.

Myth vs. Fact

Myth: Cellulitis is contagious.

Fact: Cellulitis itself cannot be spread from one person to another through casual contact.

Myth: Redness is always part of normal lymphedema.

Fact: Persistent redness—especially when accompanied by warmth, pain, or fever—should always be evaluated by your healthcare provider.

Myth: If symptoms improve overnight, I don't need to call my provider.

Fact: Cellulitis can temporarily appear to improve before worsening. Medical evaluation is still important.

Protecting Yourself Every Day

Living with lymphedema means becoming familiar with your own body. Over time, you'll learn what your normal swelling looks and feels like, making it easier to recognize when something changes.

Don't let the possibility of cellulitis create fear. Instead, let it build awareness. The more familiar you become with the early warning signs, the more confident you'll feel knowing when to seek help.

Education is one of the most effective tools you have to protect your health.

We're Here When You Need Us

If you notice changes in your skin, increased swelling, or symptoms that concern you, don't wait to see what happens tomorrow.

The team at Aetherus Wound & Lymphatics is here to answer questions, evaluate concerns, and provide prompt treatment when needed. Early recognition and timely care can make all the difference.

Protect your skin. Know the signs. Trust your instincts. We're here to help every step of the way.