

Staph Infection

What is a staph infection?

It is a type of infection caused by a *Staphylococcus* (or "staph") bacteria. Actually, about 25% of people normally carry staph in the nose, mouth, genitals, and anal area. The foot is also very prone to pick up bacteria from the floor. The infection often begins with a little cut, which gets infected with bacteria.

These staph infections range from a simple boil to antibiotic-resistant infections to flesh-eating infections. The difference between all these is how deep and how fast the infection spreads, and how treatable it is with antibiotics. The antibiotic-resistant infections are more common in North America, because of our overuse of antibiotics.

The type of staph infection that involves skin is called cellulitis and affects the skin's deeper layers. It is treatable with antibiotics.

This type of infection is very common in the general population -- and more common and more severe in people with weak immune systems. People who have diabetes or weakened immunity are particularly prone to developing cellulitis.

What Are the Symptoms of Staph Infection?

Staph cellulitis usually begins as a small area of tenderness, swelling, and redness. Sometimes it begins with an open sore. Other times, there is no break in the skin at all -- and it's anyone's guess where the bacteria came from.

The signs of cellulitis are those of any inflammation -- redness, warmth, swelling, and pain. Any skin sore or ulcer that has these signs may be developing cellulitis. If the staph infection spreads, the person may develop a fever, sometimes with chills and sweats, as well as swelling in the area.

What's the Treatment for Staph Infection?

Antibiotics are used to treat these infections. But there's been a gradual change in how well these antibiotics work. While most staph infections used to be treatable with penicillin, in the 1980s that changed and stronger antibiotics are now used.

In about 50% of cases, however, resistance is seen to even these stronger antibiotics. These cases are not just happening in hospitals -- as once was true -- but now are occurring in the general community. That's been a problem. Many doctors are accustomed to using certain antibiotics, but those then fail because of antibiotic resistance. There are several more potent antibiotics now, but doctors need to know when to use them.

There's another treatment sometimes used with staph infections. If the infection goes so deep that it involves muscles or fibers that enclose muscles, it needs to be surgically cleaned.

Can Staph Infection Be Prevented?

You can take steps to help prevent it. Any time you have a cut or skin breakdown, wash it with soap and water, keep it clean and dry, use antiseptic ointment, and keep it covered. A couple of recent outbreaks among football players began when one team member had a boil, and the infection was spread to other team members.

The staph infection is contagious if the wound is weeping or draining, and if people share towels or other items that are contaminated. Wearing foot coverings in locker rooms and other commonly used areas can help prevent contamination.

If the sore becomes unusually painful or red, get prompt medical attention. If red lines develop, that's a sign the infection is spreading and needs immediate medical attention.