

Skin Infections

What is a skin infection?

A skin infection is when germs like bacteria and viruses infect the skin through the blood. These germs can spread to other areas like the brain, heart, spine and bones, and cause life-threatening infections.

Cellulitis and abscesses are examples of skin infections.



What can cause skin infections?

- Drugs cut with irritating substances
- Scratches, burns & wounds
- "Missing" the vein
- Bug bites
- Broken skin (e.g., eczema)
- "Skin popping" (injecting under the skin)

What does it look and feel like?

- Sensitive/painful to touch
- Increase or change in drainage color
- Redness, warmth & swelling
- Foul smell after cleaning



Signs the infection could be spreading

- Fever and chills
- Short of breath
- Fast heart rate
- Low blood pressure
- Redness is spreading
- Feeling faint/unwell
- Red "streaks"

Get help right away!

Mark the edge to see if the redness is spreading

What can increase risk?

- Weakened immune system due to medications or health conditions (e.g., diabetes, chemotherapy, HIV)
- Unclean skin or injection supplies
- Poor circulation
- Lack of access to healthy foods



DO

- ✓ See a healthcare provider as soon as you can for:
 - Wound care, medications & draining of abscesses if needed
 - Tetanus and hepatitis B immunizations

- ✓ If you can't get help right away:
 - Apply warm damp towels or soak abscesses in warm salt water several times a day.
 - Raise the area if there is swelling.
 - Clean the wound. Sterile saline or sterile water is best. Tap water is OK to use.
 - Keep open wounds covered with clean & dry bandages.
 - Get help if there are symptoms of infection. If treated quickly, hospital stays can be avoided

- ✓ Wash your hands and body with soap & water.
- ✓ Boost protein (e.g., nuts, beans, tofu, fish, meat), minerals & vitamins in your diet or take a multivitamin. This will help wounds heal.

DON'T

- ✗ Poke or cut open an abscess. This can damage your skin and spread the infection.
- ✗ Take antibiotics meant for other people or animals. The wrong medication or dose can make you sick or cause antibiotic resistance.
- ✗ Use creams or ointments unless advised to by your healthcare provider. They can make the infection worse.
- ✗ Use hydrogen peroxide, alcohol wipes or rubbing alcohol. They slow healing.

1 <https://medpics.ucsd.edu/index.cfm?curpage=image&course=clinlmg&mode=browse&lesson=114&img=1954>

2 Dr. John Heilman (2010) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CellulitisJmh649.JPG>

3 <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cellulitis/>

Skin Infections: drug use tips

- Before injecting, clean the injection site with soap & water, or alcohol swabs.
- Do not use saliva.



Safer Injection tips to avoid damage to the skin and skin infections

Use new supplies each time.
Never reuse or share supplies.

Use [Sterifit FAST](#) filters, to remove fillers & coatings. They can filter better than cotton.

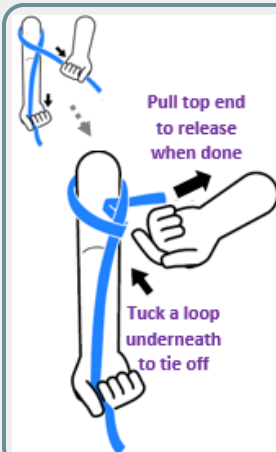


Rotate sites to avoid collapsed veins, scar tissue & bruising.

Use ascorbic acid (Vitamin C). Lemon juice can cause infections.

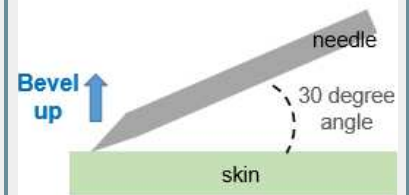


Use sterile water to dissolve drugs. Non-sterilized water can damage veins and cause infection.



- Use an elastic tie to make it easier to find a vein.
- Allows for quick release without damaging the skin or veins.
- Release the tie **before** injecting to avoid damaging the vein.

Bevel = sloped edge of the needle tip



Bevel up when injecting to avoid damaging the vein

Get your drugs checked to see what's in them!

In the toxic drug supply, drugs can be cut with things that can make you sick or cause skin infections.

See the resource page of the

[Toward the Heart](#) website for more information.

Drug Checking Services in BC

- BC Centre for Substance Use: <https://drugcheckingbc.ca/drug-checking-sites/>
- [Getyourdrugstested.com](https://getyourdrugstested.com) - by mail too
- Toward the Heart - find a site <https://towardtheheart.com/site-finder>

More tips



Have an overdose plan. Carry naloxone.



Be aware of your health & tolerance



Start low, go slow



Use one drug at a time

Beware of mixing. Avoid using alcohol. Prescription drugs can increase risk of overdose. If you do mix, use less than you normally would and go slow.



Have a buddy

If you choose to use alone, get someone to look in on you. Use a life saving app like [Lifeguard](#) or [Brave](#).