



[cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) | 1.800.227.2345

## Cellulitis

**Cellulitis** is a common and serious type of skin infection. It can develop when bacteria get into a cut, break, or opening in the skin. If you have lymphedema or a weak immune system, your risk for cellulitis is higher.

There are steps you can take to help prevent or manage cellulitis during and after cancer treatment

- [Risk factors for cellulitis](#)
- [What are the symptoms of cellulitis?](#)
- [Treatment for cellulitis](#)
- [When to get medical help](#)
- [Tips for preventing and managing cellulitis](#)
- [Learn more](#)

### Risk factors for cellulitis

Anything that creates a break or opening in the skin, allowing bacteria to enter, can cause cellulitis.

Certain conditions increase your risk of cellulitis:

- A weakened immune system
- A past history of cellulitis
- [Lymphedema](#)<sup>1</sup>
- [Radiation dermatitis](#)<sup>2</sup>
- [Rashes](#)<sup>3</sup> or skin conditions such as eczema or psoriasis
- Skin trauma or injury such as insect bites, cuts, or abrasions
- [Pressure sores](#)<sup>4</sup> or other [wounds](#)<sup>5</sup>

- Poor circulation
- Tobacco use

The more of these factors you have, the higher your risk of developing cellulitis.

## **What are the symptoms of cellulitis?**

The signs and symptoms of cellulitis can be different depending where on the body it happens. But generally, areas of cellulitis often have:

- Red or warm skin
- Scaly, broken skin
- New or worse pain or swelling
- Signs or symptoms of infection such as fever, chills, weakness, or muscle aches

**Cellulitis is a serious medical condition. If you have signs or symptoms of cellulitis, talk to your doctor or cancer care team right away. If you can't reach them, go to the emergency department.**

## **Treatment for cellulitis**

## When to get medical help

If you have skin changes such as redness, warmth, swelling, or scaly/peeling skin, talk to your doctor or cancer care team.

If you also have signs or symptoms of an infection (such as fever or chills), get medical help right away. **If you can't reach your doctor, go to the emergency room.**

Learn more about [infections in people with cancer](#)<sup>6</sup>.

## Tips for preventing and managing cellulitis

The best way to prevent cellulitis is to take care of your skin:

- Keep your skin clean.
- Wash with a mild soap and water unless you've been told otherwise.
- Wear protective gloves or shoes to do activities that could damage or cut your skin.
- Use lotion to keep your skin from becoming dry and cracked.
- Protect your skin from the sun and UV radiation. Use a sunscreen with 30 SPF or higher.
- Avoid extreme heat and sunburns. These can trigger cellulitis.
- Keep your nails trimmed short, but don't cut or trim your cuticles.
- Don't get professional manicures or pedicures during cancer treatment or if you have a weakened immune system.
- Always use a clean razor on clean skin, especially when you shave your underarms.
- Use an insect repellent to prevent bug bites when outdoors.

Some doctors also suggest having blood draws, IVs, and shots done in the arm that is not on the side of your treatment, if possible.

Not all experts agree with this, because the studies don't show a clear cause and effect between cellulitis and these types of procedures. For that reason, it's important to talk to your doctor or cancer care team about whether you need this restriction.

## Learn more

[Hair, Skin, and Nail Problems](#) <sup>7</sup>

Cancer and cancer treatment can cause changes to your skin, nails, and hair (including

hair loss). Learn what to look for and how to manage your symptoms.

### [Managing Cancer-related Side Effects](#) <sup>8</sup>

Learn more about common side effects that can be caused by cancer and cancer treatment and what you can do to manage them.

## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/swelling/lymphedema.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/swelling/lymphedema.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation/effects-on-different-parts-of-body.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation/effects-on-different-parts-of-body.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails/skin-rash.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails/skin-rash.html)
4. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails/pressure-sores.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails/pressure-sores.html)
5. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails/scars-and-wounds.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails/scars-and-wounds.html)
6. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/infections.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/infections.html)
7. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails.html)
8. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects.html)

## References

American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO). Skin conditions. Cancer.net. Content no longer available.

Armstrong DG, Meyr, AJ, Eidt JF, Mills JL, Bruera E, Berman, R. Basic principles of wound management. *UpToDate*. UpToDate, Inc; 2024. Updated June 2022. Accessed August 22, 2024. <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/basic-principles-of-wound-management>

Armstrong DG, Meyr AJ. Risk factors for impaired wound healing and wound complications. *UpToDate*. UpToDate, Inc; 2024. Updated June 2023. Accessed August 22, 2024. <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/risk-factors-for-impaired-wound-healing-and-wound-complications>

Spelman D, Baddour LM. Acute cellulitis and erysipelas in adults: treatment. *UpToDate*. UpToDate, Inc; 2024. Updated December 2023. Accessed August 23, 2024.

