

Urgent Care

ABSCESS CARE – Patient Education

An abscess is a collection of bacteria and the inflammatory cells and tissue fluids that the body creates in response to the bacterial invasion and growth. There is usually infection in the adjacent tissues also, which causes redness and pain. This is called cellulitis.

The proper treatment of an abscess usually involves drainage of the pus-like material, done under local anesthesia. It is normally somewhat painful, because it is difficult to completely numb an area when it is infected. There is usually some bleeding. If the bleeding soaks through the dressing/gauze, please call us.

Antibiotics are often necessary to help clear the infection, particularly while the wound is still open. These antibiotics can cause some diarrhea...if this becomes severe, or uncontrolled with Imodium, please call. If the diarrhea does not resolve after finishing the antibiotics, please return.

The opening that was made in the skin must be kept open for 3-14 days, depending on the size and how quickly the abscess can heal from the inside out. If it closes over before the cavity fills in, the pus-like material will re-accumulate and this will need to be re-incised and drained again. This can be done one of 2 ways:

- 1) The wound can be repacked with gauze every day. This can be done at the clinic, or we can teach you how to do this at home. 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 30-45 minutes before you have the abscess repacked, as it may hurt to take the gauze out and replace it.

- 2) Remove packing in 24 hours. Clean the cut edges with ½ strength hydrogen peroxide (dilute 1:1 with warm water) and clean q-tips three times a day being careful not to get it in the abscess cavity. Hydrogen peroxide can slow down healing of the cavity. Clean the inside cut wound edges with 3 separate q-tips, saturated in the hydrogen peroxide solution, followed by a fourth to dry the wound out. Do this 2-3x/day, to prevent the wound edges from sealing over before the cavity fills in. This method allows the wound to drain better and no packing is necessary to keep the wound open.

The wound can get wet briefly in the shower, with soap and water. You should not swim or take baths until the wound is sealed over. Please call with any questions, and return as directed.

What is a skin or soft tissue abscess?

An abscess is a pocket of infected fluid with a thick wall around it. Skin abscesses occur when hair follicles or sweat glands get infected. Soft tissue abscesses occur in the tissue just beneath the skin.

How does it occur?

Most of the time an abscess forms when 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 keep the bacteria from spreading. 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.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of an **abscess** in the skin or soft tissues are:

- swelling
- redness
- pain

If the skin around the abscess has become infected, the redness may spread toward the center of the body and you may have a fever, body aches, and tiredness.

How is it treated?

The treatment for an abscess is usually to cut it open and drain 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 won't let antibiotics get through to fight the infection.

When an I&D is done, first your health care 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 health care 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 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. Another method is to use frequent applications of hydrogen peroxide to the wound edges to keep them from closing prematurely.

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

- Clean your skin as soon as possible after getting scratched or poked.
- If you think you may be developing an abscess, see your health care provider as soon as possible