

Skin Abscesses

An abscess is a localized infection with a collection of pus. Abscesses may be called by other names, such as “boils” or “furuncles.” They usually cause a painful, red swelling under the skin, which may occur anywhere on the body. Your doctor may perform a simple procedure to drain pus from the abscess. To help prevent abscesses, keep skin wounds clean and covered until they have healed.

What are abscesses?

An abscess is a localized collection of pus. It can occur anywhere in the body. An abscess of the skin is usually a minor problem that goes away with proper treatment. (Abscesses can also occur elsewhere in the body, including in the internal organs. This is a more serious problem, usually occurring as a complication of another disease or medical problem.)

The doctor may use a scalpel to drain away the infected fluid from inside the abscess. An antibiotic may be recommended to make sure the infection is completely eliminated. Even minor skin wounds can develop into abscesses without proper care.

What do they look like?

- An area of swelling on or under the skin. Abscesses are usually small at first outset but may gradually get bigger.
- Abscesses may occur anywhere on the body; the buttocks are a common location. The skin over the abscess may be inflamed (red, warm, and tender). Abscesses can be quite painful, depending on their size and location.
- Some abscesses may drain fluid on their own.

What causes abscesses?

- Abscesses are caused when a minor wound (such as a cut or scratch) becomes infected with bacteria (such as the common “staph” [*Staphylococcus*] bacteria).
- The infection becomes walled off or enclosed as the body attempts to fight off the germs. Abscesses may go unnoticed for some time, especially if they are located below the skin.

What puts your child at risk of abscesses?

Without proper wound care, any cut, scratch, or other wound may lead to an abscess.

Can abscesses be prevented?

- Wash all wounds thoroughly as soon as possible.
- Keep wounds covered with bandages until the skin closes over them.
- Teach children to keep their fingers away from wounds and scabs, since fingers may carry germs that lead to abscesses.

What are some complications of abscesses?

- The main complication is that the abscess will grow larger or spread to nearby areas.

How are abscesses treated?

Although most skin abscesses are not serious, they require medical care. Your doctor can provide proper treatment to relieve discomfort and prevent the infection from spreading.

- *Incision and drainage.* The doctor may perform a minor surgical procedure to drain infected fluid from the abscess. This “incision and drainage” procedure usually provides prompt pain relief. You will be given instructions on how to care for your child’s wound after the procedure.
- Usually, the doctor makes a small cut on the abscess to drain the pus. The cut may be packed with gauze to keep it open long enough for proper healing and to prevent the abscess from coming back.
- Some small abscesses may be treated with warm compresses and antibiotics, without incision and drainage.
- *Antibiotics.* Depending on your child’s situation, the doctor may recommend antibiotics to kill any remaining bacteria. Make sure your child finishes the entire prescription, even if he or she is feeling better.

When should I call your office?

After treatment for an abscess, call our office if there is any sign that the infection is returning (recurrence of swelling, pain, warmth).

If your child develops fever, chills, or other signs of spreading infection, seek medical care as soon as possible. 