

# Wound infection: what to look for and what to do

Infection is a common complication of having a wound. It is important to know the signs and symptoms and when to seek help immediately to prevent the infection worsening.

A wound infection arises when micro-organisms such as bacteria, viruses and fungi (also known as bugs or germs) from the environment enter a wound and begin to multiply.

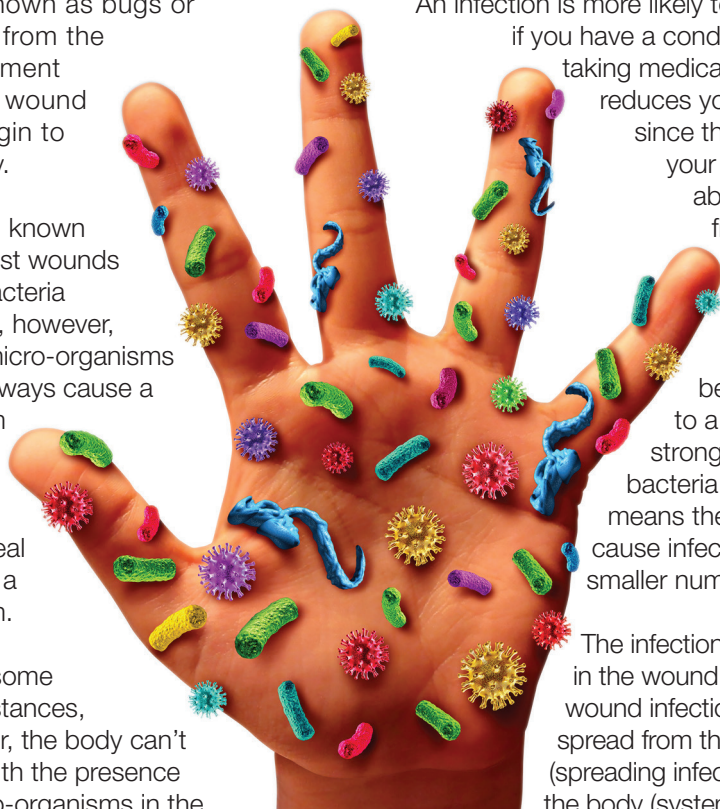
It is well known that most wounds have bacteria present, however, these micro-organisms don't always cause a problem and the wound can go on to heal without a problem.

Under some circumstances, however, the body can't cope with the presence of micro-organisms in the

wound and it starts to show signs and symptoms of a wound infection.

An infection is more likely to happen if you have a condition or are taking medication that reduces your immunity, since this affects your body's ability to fight off the infection. Sometimes, it may be that you have been exposed to a particularly strong or virulent bacteria — this means they are able to cause infection quickly in smaller numbers.

The infection may just be in the wound itself (local wound infection) or it may spread from the wound (spreading infection) and into the body (systemic infection).



Whatever the circumstances leading to wound infection, it is important to know the signs and symptoms and what to do if you think you may have a wound infection, to prevent it from progressing into a spreading or even life-threatening infection.

## How will I know what a wound infection looks and feels like?

If you have a local wound infection, you may notice that your wound starts to produce more exudate (wound fluid) than is normal for you, or it may suddenly start producing pus (yellow-white liquid). There may be a sudden increase in pain in and around the wound. On the surrounding skin you may see swelling and it may look red and feel warm or hot to the touch. Sometimes, an odour may be present which wasn't there before.

It can be difficult to tell if your wound is infected, particularly if you have darker skin where redness is less obvious, or if you take immunosuppressant drugs that prevent your immune system from responding to infection. If ever you have any concerns visit or speak to a healthcare professional for advice.

If you have a wound infection that is spreading, you will have the same symptoms as for a local infection, but they may begin to spread away from the wound, leaving a 'track' of redness and heat. If you have a systemic infection, you may have the symptoms already described for local

and spreading infection, but you may also have general aches and pains, or feel generally unwell and have a high temperature. You should seek medical attention as soon as possible if you suspect a spreading infection.

## How can I prevent my wound from getting infected?

If you have a small laceration, cut or graze, clean the wound with warm water and dress it as soon as possible. Keep an eye on it, and if it becomes red or the wound starts to ooze pus, seek medical advice.

## How is a wound infection treated?

For a local wound infection, you may be treated with an antimicrobial dressing that contains an active ingredient to resolve your infection, such as silver, iodine or honey. You will usually need to wear the dressing for about two weeks, but it may be continued for longer if the infection is more severe.

If you have a spreading or systemic wound infection, you will need either oral or intravenous antibiotics in addition to covering your wound with an antimicrobial dressing. Once your wound infection is resolved, you can return to using a normal wound dressing.

## Can a wound infection become serious?

Sometimes, wound infections can spread and cause serious problems. This is more

likely with large wounds, deep wounds, and surgical wounds, and in people who are more vulnerable to infection.

If a wound infection spreads, it can cause infection of the deep tissues under the skin (cellulitis).

## Signs and symptoms of cellulitis

Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the skin. The signs and symptoms of cellulitis include:

- Redness, usually in one leg only
- New or increasing swelling
- Pain or tenderness
- The skin will feel hot or like it's burning
- Feeling generally unwell with flu-like symptoms, sometimes starting a few days before other signs and symptoms of infection are obvious.

If you think you might have cellulitis, it's important to get help straight away as it can become serious if it is not treated quickly with antibiotics.

## Signs and symptoms of sepsis

Occasionally a systemic infection can

become serious and develop into sepsis, also known as blood poisoning or blood infection. Sepsis is a life-threatening reaction by the body to severe infection. It requires urgent and immediate medical attention. It can be hard to spot because the symptoms can be like symptoms of other conditions, including flu or a chest infection.

For an adult or older child these are the symptoms of sepsis:

- Acting confused, slurred speech or not making sense
- Blue, grey, pale or blotchy skin, lips or tongue – on brown or black skin, this may be easier to see on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet
- A rash that does not fade when you roll a glass over it, the same as meningitis
- Difficulty breathing, breathlessness or breathing very fast.

You may not have all these symptoms, but if any doubt, you must seek medical attention immediately.



*Professor David Gray, Professor of Wound Healing, Birmingham City University, comments:*

'Knowing the signs and symptoms of wound infection means you can act quickly and get the treatment you need before your condition worsens. For some people, such as those with diabetes-related foot ulcers, wound infection can quickly become limb threatening if not acted upon quickly.'