



Frequently asked questions about

Impetigo

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

What is impetigo?

Impetigo (imp-uh-tie-go) is a common skin infection caused by Staphylococcus (staph) or Streptococcus (strep) bacteria. Impetigo commonly occurs when strep or staph bacteria enter the skin through cuts or insect bites. It can also develop in intact, healthy skin, particularly in children. Red, weeping sores form where the bacteria have entered the skin.

How is impetigo spread?

Impetigo is spread by direct contact with sores or mucus from the nose or throat of an infected person. The sores have large numbers of bacteria present, so impetigo is very contagious. Scratching or touching an infected area of the skin and then touching another part of the body can spread infection to that area. Impetigo can also spread from one person to another in the same manner. Hand-to-skin contact is the most common source for the spread of impetigo. Lesions will appear 1-3 days after the person is infected.

Who is at risk for impetigo?

Persons who have cuts, scratches, insect bites, or other breaks in the skin which come in contact with the bacteria that cause impetigo are at greatest risk. Crowded conditions and participation in skin-to-skin contact activities, such as sports, can increase the risk of infection. Persons who have chronic (long-term) skin conditions, such as eczema, are also more likely to get impetigo. Impetigo is most common among children 2-6 years of age.

How do I know if I have impetigo?

Symptoms start with red or pimple-like sores surrounded by red skin. These sores can appear anywhere on the body, but mostly on the face, arms, and legs. The lesions fill with pus, break open after a few days, and form a thick, honey-colored crust. Itching is common. The sores usually are not painful, although they may be tender to the touch. Usually, your health care provider can diagnose impetigo by looking at the skin lesions, but sometimes, your health care provider may order laboratory testing to determine which bacteria are causing the infection.

How can impetigo be treated?

Your health care provider may recommend only hygienic measures for minor cases. Keeping the skin clean can help mild infections heal on their own. Antibiotic creams and ointments can be used on the surface of the sores. Be sure to follow your health care provider's directions completely if given a cream or ointment. Oral antibiotics may also be used to treat impetigo. If prescribed, be sure to finish all oral medication as directed. This will help limit the likelihood of reinfection and the development of antibiotic resistance.

How is impetigo prevented?

The primary method of prevention is keeping the skin clean by:

- Bathing or showering each day with soap and water
- Washing hands after each contact with someone who has impetigo
- Keeping fingernails short and clean
- Washing all cuts, scratches, insects bites, or other wounds with soap and water

Other prevention methods include:

- Do not let children play or have close contact with someone who has impetigo.
- Keep an infected person home until no longer contagious.
- Avoid scratching the sores if infected.

Where can I learn more information?

For more information on impetigo, please refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) web site at:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/groupastreptococcal_g.htm

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