

Abscess

Patient information leaflet

What is an abscess?

An abscess is a painful collection of pus that is caused by a bacterial infection. Abscesses may be found in any area of the body, but most abscesses presenting for urgent attention are found on the extremities, buttocks, breast, perianal area (the area around the anus), or from a hair follicle.

What does an abscess look and feel like?

An abscess often appears as a swollen, pus-filled lump under the surface of the skin, or it may look more like an open break in the skin. Abscesses are often red and painful. A boil is a common example of an abscess.

Who is affected by abscesses?

Anyone can develop an abscess, and they can occur almost anywhere in the body.

In most cases, abscesses affect people who are otherwise well. They are caused by an infection in the root of a hair, or by a blocked sweat gland. Abscesses are more common among people who have diabetes.

What are the signs and symptoms of an abscess?

The signs and symptoms of an abscess depend on whereabouts it develops in your body.

If you have an abscess, you may have symptoms such as:

- a smooth swelling under your skin, or an open wound, or sore
- pus in the affected area that appears white, yellow, or green, and may smell unpleasant
- pain, warmth, and redness in the affected area
- feeling generally unwell (fever, chills, and aches and pains)

Abscesses can appear anywhere on your body. However, the skin around the anus (back passage) is one of the most common areas to be affected.

What causes abscesses?

Bacteria can cause a skin abscess when it is able to get under the surface of your skin. This may occur if you have a minor skin wound, such as a small

cut, or graze, or if an oil (sebaceous), or sweat gland in your skin becomes blocked.

How are abscesses treated?

Abscesses can be treated with antibiotics and either a drainage procedure, or surgery, to remove the pus.

The treatment that you receive for an abscess will depend on the type of abscess that you have and how large it is.

If you have an abscess, it is likely that your GP will prescribe antibiotics to help clear the infection. If your abscess is small, antibiotics may be the only treatment that you need to kill the bacteria so that the abscess can heal.

However, in most cases, antibiotics alone will not be enough to clear a skin abscess. It is usually necessary to drain the pus from an abscess in order to clear the infection.

If an abscess is not drained, it may continue to become larger and fill with pus until it bursts, which can be very painful. If an abscess is allowed to burst and drain of pus on its own, there is also a risk that it will not drain properly, causing the abscess to come back or the infection to spread.

What surgery would be performed if you have an abscess?

If you need to have your abscess drained, it is likely that you will have a small operation under anaesthetic. The anaesthetic that is used will depend on the size and severity of your abscess. You may have a local anaesthetic (you will be awake, but the area of the abscess will be numb), or a general anaesthetic (you will be asleep).

Your surgeon will make an incision (cut) in the abscess to allow all of the pus to drain out. They may also take a sample of pus for testing in order to confirm which bacteria caused the infection. Once all of the pus has been drained, your surgeon will clean the hole that is left by the abscess using saline (salt solution) or antiseptic.

Your abscess will be left open so that any more pus that is produced can be drained away. If your abscess is deep, you may need to have an antiseptic dressing placed inside it to keep it open. Once the procedure is complete, the wound should heal in two-three weeks. It may leave a small scar.

You are normally able to go home on the same day as your surgery, unless the consultant is recommending keeping you in for intravenous antibiotic (through a needle in your arm) cover after your operation, this will be at the consultants discretion.

What is the recovery following surgery for an abscess?

- You will need to have your wound dressings redressed daily by your practice nurse. Once the practice nurse is happy with how your wound is healing they will decide whether to change the dressing less frequently.
- You are advised to wash and dry yourself thoroughly to prevent infection.
- You can eat and drink as normal. A high protein diet is advised to help the healing process. Depending on where your abscess is you may be advised to eat a high fibre diet to prevent constipation, as you may have difficulties with constipation if you have a perianal abscess.
- You are normally able to continue driving the day after your operation. It is advised to contact your insurance company to ask their advice. You may feel a little uncomfortable and choose not to drive for some time if you have had surgery on the buttock area, perianal area or breast as you may find it difficult to sit or turn the steering wheel.

How can I prevent getting an abscess?

- Look after your skin - ensuring that your skin is clean, healthy, and free of bacteria can help to reduce the risk of an abscess developing.
- Eat healthily - eating a diet that is rich in vitamins and minerals can help your immune system to work properly and fight off infection.
- Lose weight if you are overweight or obese - if you are overweight, or obese, you may be more at risk of developing abscesses due to bacteria that is found naturally on your body becoming trapped in the folds of your skin.

You are also at greater risk of developing diabetes, which in turn will increase the likelihood of abscesses developing.

- Do not smoke - smoking damages your entire body, and can affect your immune system's ability to fight infection. If you smoke, giving up is the best thing that you can do for your general health.

Advice can be offered, e.g. smoking cessation or quit smoking helpline which can be given by your own GP. Otherwise the hospital smoking cessation nurse can also advise you on (0191) 445 3480, there is also an answer phone service and if you are finding it difficult to stop smoking whilst in hospital the smoking cessation nurse will review you on the ward.

Where should I seek advice or help?

Telephone numbers	
During the hours of 8am -8pm contact the Day Surgery Unit, North East NHS Surgery Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital	0191 445 3009
During the hours of 8pm -8am contact Level 2, North East NHS Surgery Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital	0191 445 3005
Main switchboard	0191 482 0000

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can provide help, advice and support to patients, relatives or carers who have any questions or concerns regarding their health care. PALS are unable to give medical advice. You can contact PALS on free phone 0800 953 0667. Monday - Friday, 9.00am - 5.00pm. An answer phone is available outside of these hours and calls will be returned the next working day.

Data Protection

Any personal information is kept confidential. There may be occasions where your information needs to be shared with other care professionals to ensure you receive the best care possible.

In order to assist us improve the services available your information may be used for clinical audit, research, teaching and anonymised for National NHS Reviews. Further information is available in the leaflet Disclosure of Confidential Information IL137, via Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust website or the PALS Service

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