

# Having a skin abscess drained

Department of General Surgery

Information for Patients

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## What is an abscess?

An abscess is a painful collection of pus that is caused by a bacterial infection. When bacteria enter your body, your immune system sends infection-fighting white blood cells to the affected area. As the white blood cells attack the bacteria, some nearby tissue dies, creating a hole which then fills with pus to form an abscess. The pus is a mixture of dead tissue, white blood cells and bacteria.

Most skin abscesses are caused by bacteria getting into a minor wound, the root of a hair or a blocked oil or sweat gland.

## Who is at risk of developing an abscess?

Most abscesses happen to people who are healthy, and there is no obvious reason why it has happened.

However conditions that may increase your risk are:

- inflammatory bowel disease.
- diabetes.
- another skin problem.
- conditions or treatments causing a low immune system (such as HIV, steroid treatment or chemotherapy).

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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## Where can abscesses happen?

Skin abscesses can occur in any area of the body but often happen in the skin of the back, armpit, buttocks or groin. Other common abscesses include pilonidal abscesses, where there is a build-up of pus in the skin in the cleft between the buttocks (bottom), often caused by trapped hairs beneath the skin.

## What are the symptoms?

Signs of a skin abscess can include:

- a smooth swelling under your skin that can feel hard or firm.
- pain and tenderness.
- warmth and redness.
- a build-up of white or yellow pus under the skin.
- a high temperature (fever).

## Treating an abscess

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

Some small skin abscesses may drain naturally and get better without the need for treatment. For early skin infections or small abscesses, your GP may prescribe a course of antibiotics.

However, antibiotics alone may not be enough to treat a skin abscess, and if antibiotics do not work the pus will need to be drained to clear the infection. If a skin abscess is not drained, it may go on to grow resulting in a larger abscess and risk of spreading infection.

## Incision (cut) and drainage

If your skin abscess needs draining, a small operation may be needed. This is known as 'an incision (cut) and drainage of abscess'. You may see this shortened to '**I+D of abscess**'.

The anaesthetic that is used will depend on the size and position of your abscess.

- **Local anaesthetic (LA):** you will be awake, but the area will be made numb using injections of local anaesthetic around the abscess. This can happen on the ward.
- **General anaesthetic (GA) :** you will be asleep and this will happen in an operating theatre.

Before the operation, your surgeon will talk to you about

- the procedure,
- type of anaesthetic to be used,
- ask you to sign a consent form.

During the procedure, the surgeon will make a cut (incision) in the abscess, to let the pus drain out. A small piece of skin may be removed to create a wider opening. The abscess will be left open (the skin is not stitched) so if any more pus is produced it can drain away easily. If the abscess is deep, a dressing (pack) may be placed inside the wound so the skin is kept open to let the deeper tissues heal first. This will help stop the abscess coming back. The procedure will leave a scar. Depending on the size of your abscess, the cavity can take a few weeks to fully heal up.

## What are the possible complications?

The risks of serious complications are very low but the following can happen:

- **Bleeding:** Some minor bleeding is expected as the wound is open. Bleeding that needs treatment to stop it, is rare.
- **Infection:** Antibiotics are not needed once the abscess is drained, but if the skin around the wound starts to become red or hot, you may need antibiotics.
- **Will it happen again?** Sometimes skin abscesses can come back.
- **Scarring:** There will be a scar resulting from healing of the wound.

## Going home after surgery for an abscess

You can go home on the same day as your surgery, unless you need other treatment or you have had a general anaesthetic and live alone.

### • Dressings

You will need to have regular follow up in the community by your practice nurse or district nurse (depending on local arrangements). If you have a pack in the wound this will need to be changed regularly until your nurses are happy the wound is healing. We will talk to you about these arrangements before you go home. You will be given a few days supply of dressings and then the community service will take over providing these.

### • Medication

You will be given painkillers on the ward if needed. Once the abscess is drained most people find that the pain is much better. You may only need simple painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.

### • Washing

It is important to keep the area around the abscess clean. Most people are able to bath and shower normally but you will need to time this around dressing changes. You should avoid perfumed soaps when washing. The dressings are water resistant but if they come loose after a shower simply remove the wet dressing, let the skin dry and put on a dry dressing. If there is a 'pack' inside and this falls out do not worry. Throw the pack away and re-cover the wound until your next dressing change.

- **Driving**

You must wait at least 24 hours before driving after a general anaesthetic. You must be able to fully control your vehicle before driving.

## **Can I prevent getting an abscess again?**

Most abscesses happen for no obvious reason and cannot be prevented. The following points may help reduce your risk.

- Look after your skin and make sure that your skin is clean and healthy to reduce the risk of an abscess developing.
- Eat healthily.
- If you have diabetes, controlling your blood sugar may help reduce the risk of future abscesses.
- Lose weight if you are overweight or obese. Bacteria that are found naturally on your body can become trapped in the folds of your skin. You are also at greater risk of developing diabetes. This also increases your chance of having an abscess.
- Do not smoke as 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.

## **Follow up**

Most skin abscesses do not need any follow up in an outpatient clinic as they heal very well.

If we think you do need to be seen again we will arrange a appointment for you.

## Contact details

If you need further advice after going home from hospital please contact your GP, 111 or the ward you were sent home from.

Main hospital number: 0300 303 1573

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Previous reference:

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