

Abscesses

What is an Abscess?

- An abscess is a tender, pus-filled nodule in the skin.
- The affected area is typically red, warm, painful and swollen.
- It may or may not be associated with a fever.

Causes

- An abscess occurs as a result of a bacterial infection of a hair root or skin pore.
- Bacteria that are carried on the skin, typically staph bacteria, may get through a break in the skin barrier and cause an infection.
- A particular type of staph bacteria called methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, has become a more frequent cause of these infections. The prevalence of this particular type of bacteria in your community may determine which antibiotic your doctor uses to treat the infection.

Typical Course

- When bacteria is introduced underneath the skin, the body combats the infection by walling it off, thereby creating an abscess.
- After about a week, the center of the abscess becomes soft and mushy (filled with pus). The overlying skin then thins out and becomes ready for draining. Without lancing, it will drain by itself in 3 or 4 days. Until it drains, an abscess can be extremely painful.

Treatment

- Antibiotics: Your child's doctor will likely prescribe an antibiotic that targets the staph bacteria. Treatment with an antibiotic will allow the abscess to heal faster and will reduce the chance of recurrence or further spread to the surrounding skin and tissues.
- Lancing or draining: Contact your child's healthcare provider instead of trying to drain the abscess yourself, since it needs to be lanced and handled appropriately.
 - Simply trying to squeeze the pus out yourself can be very painful. It can also carry the risk that bacteria will be forced into the bloodstream. Squeezing can also result in formation of additional abscesses in the same area
 - Once the abscess is opened, it will drain pus for 2 or 3 days prior to healing. Since the pus itself is contagious, the abscess should be covered by a large 4 x 4 inch gauze bandage and tape. Change this bandage and wash the area with an antiseptic soap 2 times a day.
- Supportive measures: Until the abscess comes to a head, apply warm compresses 3 times a day for 20 minutes to help soften the area. Since abscesses can be quite painful, you can also use a pain reliever medication as directed by your child's physician. .

Controlling the Spread of Infection

- Note that pus draining from an abscess is contagious.
- Practice good hand hygiene.
- Make sure that other people in your family do not share your child's towel or washcloth.
- Promptly wash any clothes, towels, or sheets that are contaminated with pus.
- Used bandages should be carefully thrown away.

Prevention

- Abscesses can be recurrent.
- You can reduce staph bacteria on the skin by washing with an antibacterial soap daily.

Showers are preferable to baths for decreasing the chances of a recurrent infection

When to contact your child's healthcare provider

- The abscess has come to a head and needs to be drained
- The surrounding skin turns red or becomes swollen
- The infection is not better within 48-72 hours after starting the antibiotic.
- You have other concerns or questions.