

## PATIENT INFORMATION

# Skin Abscess

### What is an abscess and what causes it?

An abscess is a collection of pus, which usually develops in response to a bacterial infection in the skin. A skin infection may enter via a minor wound, the root of a hair or a blocked oil or sweat gland. The body's immune system sends white blood cells to fight the infection. During this process some of the surrounding tissue dies and creates a cavity which fills with pus. Pus is made up of dead skin cells, white blood cells and bacteria.

### What symptoms does an abscess cause?

An abscess can develop anywhere in the body but most often affects the skin. It usually develops gradually over a few days as a painful, swollen, warm red lump. You might also experience a high temperature and feel unwell.

### What are the treatment options?

A small abscess may resolve without treatment. A warm compress may help to reduce pain and swelling, or the pus may discharge on its own. However, a course of antibiotics may be required for larger or persistent abscesses. If there is no improvement, it may need to be drained with a small incision in the skin. This may be performed using local anaesthetic to numb the area, or under a general anaesthetic which means you are completely asleep during the procedure. The cavity is washed out thoroughly and a sample of pus may be sent for testing. The wound is left open to heal gradually, and an absorbent ribbon may be placed inside the wound to aid healing. This needs to be changed regularly with your GP surgery practice nurse.

### Who is most likely to develop an abscess?

Most skin abscesses develop in people who are otherwise well. There is usually no underlying cause. Around 1 in 10 people will develop another abscess within 12 months. Some people have skin conditions which make abscesses more likely to develop. You may be more likely to develop abscesses if you have diabetes, smoke, or are overweight or obese.

### What can be done to prevent it?

- Good personal hygiene will reduce the number of bacteria on the skin and can prevent re-infection.
- Regularly washing bed sheets and towels can also help, and you should avoid sharing clothes and towels. This can reduce the chance of re-infection and spread of infection to others.
- Stopping smoking and losing weight can also help prevent the formation of abscesses.

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For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.