

Minimizing Recurring Infections

Special Considerations for Wound Care

By David Keast

Q I seem to get recurrent cellulitis infections and don't know what I can do to minimize the frequency and severity of these infections.

A Cellulitis or erysipelas is a common complication of lymphedema. It is an infection of the skin and tissues below the skin. Normal skin acts as an effective barrier against invasion of bacteria, viruses or fungi. The chronic swelling of lymphedema affects the ability of the skin to protect against this invasion. Bacteria may enter through small cracks, areas of dermatitis or fungal infection.

It is most important that you control the swelling of the affected limb through your usual treatment strategies and consistent use of compression garments. The skin must be maintained soft and supple through effective cleansing with mild pH balanced cleansers. After cleansing, the skin must be completely dried including between fingers and toes and in crevices or skin folds. A non-scented hypoallergenic moisturizer may then be applied. Seek medical attention for fungal infections and areas of dermatitis. Use appropriate clothing to protect your skin including gloves if washing dishes or working in the garden. Minor cuts and scrapes should be cleaned immediately with lots of clean water, followed by the application of an

antibiotic cream, and then covered for protection. Finally you should maximize the ability of your body to fight infections with a healthy balanced diet and regular exercise.

Despite your best efforts, you may still get one or more episodes of cellulitis per year. If you have more than two episodes per year, prophylactic daily antibiotics should be considered. The International Lymphoedema Framework Best Practice Document recommends low dose daily erythromycin or clindamycin for a period of two years. If there is no reoccurrence, the antibiotics may be stopped but if cellulitis reoccurs, lifelong prophylaxis should be considered. Finally you may wish to have an emergency supply of antibiotics to have when travelling away from home if recurrent cellulitis has been a problem.

Q What are the signs and symptoms of infection?

A Symptoms of infection may be variable. Some episodes may onset very quickly in a matter of hours. In other instances symptoms may grumble along over several weeks.

You may just feel unwell with no clear reason. Pain, redness, heat and swelling are the usual symptoms which alert you to the developing cellulitis. You may develop red streaks running up your arm or leg (lymphangitis) or swollen



David Keast MD FCFP is the Medical Director of the Chronic Wound Management Clinic, St. Joseph's Parkwood Hospital in London, Ontario. He is Clinical Adjunct Professor of Family Medicine, Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, Western University—Canada and is also a Co-Chair of the Canadian Lymphedema Framework.



lymph nodes in the groin or armpit. Blistering is sometimes seen. If you develop fever chills, headache or vomiting, these indicate a severe infection and require immediate medical attention in the nearest emergency department.

Q Can long standing wounds cause lymphedema?

A This is a really good question. Anytime a wound occurs an inflammatory response occurs to initiate healing. This will be seen as swelling, warmth and redness caused by leaking of fluid, proteins and inflammatory substances into the tissue. In the area around the acute wound there will be lymph stasis. If healing occurs this resolves, but if the wound becomes chronic the area around the wound may develop a chronic inflammatory response. Ultimately this may overwhelm the ability of the lymphatics to manage this and lymphatic dysfunction may become permanent. This is particularly seen in people with chronic ulcers, many of whom develop lymphedema. **LP**

HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you would like to have a question answered by one of the health professionals on our 'Ask the Expert' team, please contact us via email:

canadalymph@live.ca

Be sure to put "Ask The Expert" in your subject line.