Impetigo- Factsheet

What is impetigo?

Impetigo is a common and highly contagious superficial skin infection caused by streptococcal or staphylococcal bacteria.

What are the symptoms of impetigo?

The skin sores usually occur around the nose and mouth but can also be spread to other areas of the body by fingers, clothing and towels. The red sores quickly rupture and ooze for a few days and then form a yellowish-brown crust. There are more serious forms of impetigo that can penetrate deeper into the skin causing painful fluid or pus-filled sores that turn into deep ulcers.

How is impetigo spread?

Impetigo is spread from person to person through direct contact with the discharge from the sores, like when someone touches the sores and then touches another person. It can also be spread from one person to another through shared items such as clothes and towels. A person with impetigo can spread it to other parts of their own body by scratching or picking at the sores. It spreads easily in crowded conditions such as schools and childcare settings. Infections are more common in summer, and participation in sports that involve skin-to-skin contact, such as wrestling, increases the risk of developing impetigo. The bacteria that cause impetigo often enter your skin through a small skin injury, such as a rash or from an insect bite.

How long are people contagious?

With treatment, impetigo is usually no longer contagious within 24 to 48 hours. Without treatment, impetigo often clears on its own in 2 to 4 weeks. It's important to keep your child home from school or day care until she/he is no longer contagious — usually 24 hours after you begin antibiotic treatment or until lesions are healing and no new lesions appear.

Who gets impetigo?

Although impetigo is most common in infants and children, it can occur in people of any age.

What treatment is available for people with impetigo?

Impetigo is usually treated with an antibiotic ointment or cream that is applied directly to the sores. Sometimes you need to first soak the sores in warm water or use wet compresses to help remove the scabs so that the antibiotic can get into the skin. For more widespread sores, antibiotics taken by mouth might be prescribed.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Children who may not be able to prevent their impetigo spreading to others should stay home from day care or school until 24 hours after beginning antibiotic treatment, or until lesions are healing and no new lesions appear.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting impetigo?

It is important to keep your skin clean including washing any cuts, scrapes, insect bites or other wounds right away. To help prevent impetigo spreading to others: gently wash the affected areas with mild soap and running water and then cover lightly with gauze; sash an infected person's clothes, linens and towels every day and don't share them with anyone else in your family; wear gloves when applying antibiotic ointment and wash your hands thoroughly afterward; cut an infected child's nails short to prevent damage from scratching; wash hands frequently; keep your child home until your doctor says she/he isn't contagious.