



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: ABSCESS UNDER THE SKIN, I & D

The Student Health Provider has treated you today for an abscess under the skin.

An abscess is a collection of pus, an infection caused by bacteria (germs). Abscesses can be located any place in the body, but are most common under the skin.

An abscess often occurs around a break in the skin. Even an insect bite or tiny cut a person is unaware of can lead to infection. A break in the skin allows bacteria, normally present in large numbers on the skin surface, to enter germ-free layers under the skin.

Symptoms include swelling, redness, and pain at the abscess site. If the infection continues and becomes worse, whole-body symptoms such as fever and chills can occur.

The key to treatment of an abscess is incision and drainage (a hole is made in the skin to let the pus out). The incision and drainage procedure is often painful, even though the skin over the abscess is numbed.

A strip of gauze or rubber tubing is often packed into the abscess cavity after the pus is drained. The packing is left in place one to two days to keep the abscess draining. The packing may be left in place longer if the abscess continues to drain large amounts of pus.

An abscess usually responds well to drainage. Be aware, though, that the infection can spread and even affect the whole body. Serious infection is more likely in persons with diabetes, AIDS, chemotherapy treatment, or other conditions which limit the body's ability to fight infection.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR ABSCESS:

1. Rest the affected area. If the affected part is an arm or leg, *elevate* the limb above the level of your heart. Rest and elevation help minimize swelling.
2. If an antibiotic is prescribed, take it as directed, until gone.
3. Over-the-counter pain medications can relieve discomfort associated with an abscess. Acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or naproxen can be taken, depending on individual preference.
4. Return to the Student Health Center or make a follow-up appointment with your personal/referral doctor as directed for removal of the packing. After the packing is removed, begin soaking the abscess area in *hot* (not scalding) water three times a day for 20 to 30 minutes.
5. Schedule a visit with Student Health or your personal/referral doctor several days to a week after the packing is removed. Your provider can make sure the infection is healing properly.
6. If your condition becomes worse, seek medical care *promptly*. Specifically, return to the Student Health Center or see your personal/referral doctor or go to the closest emergency department if the infected area is *increasing* in size, your overall condition worsens, or you develop whole-body symptoms. Whole-body symptoms include high fever (102 or greater) or hard shaking chills.