



University of North Carolina Wilmington  
Abrons Student Health Center

## INSTRUCTION SHEET: ABSCESS UNDER THE SKIN, NO I & D

The Student Health Provider has begun treatment 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 drainage: The pus must come out. Often, an incision and drainage (I & D) is done by the provider. The skin over the abscess is numbed, and a hole is made in the skin to let the pus out. The provider and you have decided to start warm soaks and antibiotics for now, and to see if the I & D will need to be done in the next few days.

Your infection may respond to the warm soaks and antibiotic alone. Or, it may need drainage in the near future. Again, be aware 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. Take the antibiotic as prescribed, until gone.
3. Soak the abscess area in *hot* (not scalding) water three times a day for 20 to 30 minutes. Or, you can apply a hot, wet washcloth to the area.
4. Over-the-counter pain medications can relieve discomfort associated with an abscess. Acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or naproxen can be taken, depending on individual preference.
5. Return to the Student Health Center or make a follow-up appointment with your personal/referral doctor as directed.
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.