**What are abscesses?**

An abscess is a pocket of pus. Pus means you have an infection. Pus is dead tissue, bacteria, and the white blood cells that gather to try and kill the infection. An abscess can start anywhere in the body where bacteria infect damaged tissue. Drug users often get abscesses at injection sites. We are more likely to damage tissue and develop an abscess when we skin pop, muscle it, or miss the vein. Both the cut and the drug itself can damage tissue. We can even get an abscess AFTER we stop injecting because impurities are still in our bodies. People with weak immune systems (i.e. living with HIV and AIDS) are more likely to develop abscesses. If you have a weak immune system, you need to be even more careful.

**Where does bacteria come from?**

Bacteria is invisible. It can be on any used rig, cooker, filter, or tourniquet. Bacteria is also on our skin, even when we think it is clean. This bacteria can get into our bodies through any opening in our skin.

**How do we know we have an abscess?**

A hard, reddish, tender lump will usually appear at the injection site, but it can also pop up in other places. The lump might feel warmer than the skin around it. It might even feel hot, and it might hurt. It might look pink and puffy. If the lump gets bigger, the infection is getting worse.

As the infection spreads, red streaks might spread out and away from the abscess. The infection might make us feel tired or cause fever or chills. We might have chest pain if the infection goes to our heart or lungs.

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**abscess treatments**

**About Hot Soaking:**

Soaking helps draw out the infection. It helps the abscess come to a head and drain.

**Here’s how to do it:**

Soak the abscess in a tub of clean hot water. Hot water with Epsom salts works better still. You can get these from health care clinics or the drug store.

If the abscess is in a spot you can’t easily soak, then hold a hot, wet washcloth on it. You can use Epsom salts in this water too.

Soak at least 3 or 4 times a day, 10 to 15 minutes each time.

**You may also need Antibiotics:**

If your infection is bad, your doctor may prescribe antibiotics. Be sure to finish them ALL – even if you feel better before they are used up.

If you don’t take the whole prescription, the bacteria they are supposed to treat can develop resistance. This can make antibiotics less useful against future infections.

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**how to look after an abscess**

Look after it YOURSELF with HOT SOAKING if:
- It doesn’t have any red streaks or hot puffy skin around it.
- You don’t have chills or a fever.
- The lump is only a few days old.

Go to the EMERGENCY ROOM if:
- You have chest pains.
- You have chills or a fever.
- The infection looks like it is spreading really fast.

Go to a CLINIC if:
- It has not improved after 3 to 5 days.
- The lump gets bigger.
- You see red streaks spreading out from the lump.
- The lump is hot, puffy and pink.

These conditions can be life-threatening and you must seek medical help immediately!
abscesses

How can we reduce the risk of abscesses?

- Use a new rig every time you inject.
- Use in a safe place, where you do not have to rush!
- Before you use, wash your arms and hands with hot, soapy water. Hot water and rubbing also make the veins bigger and easier to hit.
- Use clean filters, cookers, and clean water every time.
- Clean the injection site with alcohol wipes.
- Don't skin pop or muscle the fix unless you can not find a vein in your arms. If you need to do this then always change the needle that you were using to try to get a vein to a clean one for the muscle or skin injection. This will decrease your risk of abscesses. If drugs are not injected into a vein they can damage tissue.
- Choose good veins. Keep your veins big and fat by drinking lots of water. It is harder to miss when you have big veins. A miss can get infected and turn into an abscess.
- Use a tie. This increases blood volume in the veins and makes thinner veins bigger and easier to see.
- Slow down. Relax. Take a deep breath to help keep your hand steady so you don't miss.
- Try not to inject into hands, feet and legs. The veins are too small and far from the heart.
- DON'T shoot into or near an abscess. DON'T squeeze or cut abscesses. This could push bacteria into your bloodstream and cause body-wide infections.

other common infections of injection drug use

An abscess can allow bacteria to get into the bloodstream, where it can travel around and cause other, more serious infections. These conditions can be life threatening and you must seek medical help immediately.

What is Septicemia?
Septicemia is a bacterial infection of the blood.
Signs and Symptoms:
Very high fever, feeling weak and very ill.

What is Endocarditis?
Endocarditis happens when bacteria in the blood stream infects the lining of the heart. This infection can damage the heart valves. Sometimes, it can travel to the lungs, brain or kidneys. 
Signs and Symptoms:
Chest pains, high fever, tiredness, headaches, night sweats, shortness of breath.

What is Cellulitis?
Cellulitis is an infection and inflammation of the skin tissue. It is usually in an injection area.
Signs and Symptoms:
The skin looks very red, swollen, hot. It may be weepy and draining fluid. It is very painful. The swelling may cause the skin to stretch tightly over the infected area and it may spread to cover a whole arm or leg. Go to a health care worker.

common infections {from injection drug use}

this brochure talks about abscesses, septicemia, endocarditis and cellulitis

harm reduction learning series

- crack (rock) cocaine
- safer injection information for drug users
- vein care
- coping with triggers
- o.d. overdose, crashing
- the safer fix

The Harm Reduction Learning Series is a joint project of the Dr. Peter Centre, Vancouver Coastal Health, and the phs. Supported in part by an unrestricted educational grant from Abbott Laboratories.

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