

Impetigo (school sores)

Information Sheet

What is it?

Impetigo (commonly known as school sores) is a skin infection caused by the Streptococcal or Staphylococcal groups of bacteria. These bacteria often live on the skin, in the throat or nose, or on other parts of the body without causing a problem but sometimes they cause an infection when they enter a cut, scratch or insect bite.

The infection is common in children but can occur in people of any age. It is common to find it in settings where there is close person-to-person contact such as childcare centres and schools.

How does a person become infected?

Impetigo is very infectious so can be easily spread from one person to another. It is spread from contact with the fluid and crusts of the sore which contains bacteria. It can be spread to other parts of the body and to other people by touching the sore directly or from contact with other surfaces that the bacteria has been transferred to, e.g. clothing, towels, bedding, toys.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Impetigo appears 4 to 10 days after exposure. The sores can appear anywhere on the body but are more commonly on the face, hands, arms and legs. The infection starts with small spots which spread and turn into red and inflamed blisters. The blisters then burst, leaving a patch of red, wet skin which weeps or oozes. The fluid dries, leaving a yellowish crust. The sores can grow in size and are often itchy.

Most cases can be diagnosed based on the symptoms and by the appearance of the sores. Sometimes the diagnosis is confirmed by testing the fluid taken from the sores.

How bad is it?

The infection is unpleasant but is not long lasting when treatment is given. Untreated infections can cause more serious illnesses but these are rare.

Impetigo may be treated with antibiotics taken by mouth or by applying antibiotic ointment to the affected areas. For diagnosis, treatment and advice, you will need to see your doctor.

Go back to your doctor if the sores do not begin to heal within two days, more sores develop, the redness spreads around the sore, your child is unwell with a fever or you are worried about their symptoms.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Because impetigo is very infectious, it is important that others are protected from contact with the sores. Your Health Protection Officer or Public Health Nurse can give you advice on this. If your child is infected, **keep them home from school or childcare** until they have had at least 24 hours of treatment. On return, any sores must be completely covered by dressings.

Food handlers should not return to work until at least 24 hours after the start of treatment.

Make sure the entire course of antibiotics is finished even if the sores seem to have cleared up earlier. The antibiotics need to keep killing the infection in the body after the skin is healed.

How do I avoid the illness?

- Completely **cover the sores** with band aids or bandages to prevent the bacteria from spreading.
- Encourage **regular hand washing** with soap and warm water. Hands must be washed and dried thoroughly after touching an infected area or handling dressings.
- An infected child must not share towels and facecloths with others.
- Wash an infected child's clothes, bedding, face cloths and towels in a separate hot wash.
- Bath/shower an infected child daily with warm water and soap.
- Cut your child's finger nails and keep them clean.
- Put all dressings and used band aids in a covered bin as soon as they are removed.
- Children **should not swim** in public or school pools if they have sores as the bacteria can spread from one person to another in the water.

For Further Information Contact:

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