

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary Template

Title: Treatment of bacterial skin abscesses: Antibiotics are usually not needed.

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Plain Language Summary:

A skin abscess or boil is a bacterial infection that occurs just below the surface of the skin. Bacteria are everywhere in our environment. Our skin usually does a great job of protecting our body from these tiny creatures. Sometimes, bacteria manage to poke through our skin which can result in a painful red lump. The lump usually starts out small and then grows bigger. After a few days, the lump may be very painful and look like it is filled with white pus. At this point, the lump will look almost like a giant pimple. This is referred to as a boil. Boils can occur anywhere on a person's body. They occur most often in sweaty areas where the skin rubs together like in the armpits and on the buttocks. They can affect people of all ages.



What to do if you get a boil?

All boils are different in terms of size and severity. Most can be treated at home. One effective form of treatment includes soaking the infected area in warm water. If you do not have a bathtub, apply a warm wash cloth to the area. The warm water will increase blood flow to the area which will promote healing. After several days of applying heat, the boil will become soft and most likely drain on its own. Do not attempt to pop or cut open lump before it appears ready to drain. This could cause infection.

If the lump continues to get bigger and more painful, medical treatment may be needed. After examining the boil, your doctor may recommend that he cut it open with a surgical knife so that the pus can drain. It is important that this be done by your doctor to decrease risk of infection. After your doctor drains the boil, he or she will clean the area and apply a bandage and recommend that you do the same each day until the wound heals. Some doctors will prescribe antibiotics to help treat the boil after they cut it open. Cephalexin is the name of an antibiotic which is commonly used. Recent research however has shown this antibiotic does not help make the boil go away. Therefore, this medication should not be used. It is unhelpful, costly and may cause side effects. There are some rare situations in which an antibiotic may be needed. These situations include having a fever along with the boil, or if the infection seems to be spreading to other areas of your skin. You should also seek medical attention if you have other medical conditions like diabetes or a weak immune system.

How to prevent boils from occurring?

The most important thing a person can do to prevent boils from occurring is to maintain good personal hygiene. This includes the following:

- Showering daily with soap that kills bacteria
- Frequent hand washing
- Washing clothes and bed linens regularly
- Cleaning skin wounds and skin cuts

Additional Resources:

Mayo Clinic:

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/boils-and-carbuncles/DS00466>

WebMD:

<http://www.webmd.com/skin-problems-and-treatments/boils?page=2>

Key Words:

Boil

Skin Abscess

Antibiotics

Incision and drainage

Treatment

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