
Impetigo (school sores)

What is impetigo?

Impetigo is a contagious skin infection caused by *Staphylococcus* or *Streptococcus* bacteria. These bacteria can live harmlessly on the skin surface and also in people's noses.

Impetigo is also known as school sores because it is common among school-aged children. It is most common in children between 2 and 6, although it can also affect adolescents and adults.

How do you get impetigo?

Impetigo is commonly spread by touching the sores or the mucous in the nose or throat of an infected person.

School sores have large numbers of bacteria in them and are very contagious if left untreated. If you scratch or touch the infected area and then touch another part of your body or someone else's, you can spread the infection.

Who is most at risk?

If you have cuts, scratches, insect bites or other breaks in the skin, and then come into contact with the *Staphylococcus* or *Streptococcus* bacteria, you are more likely to get impetigo.

Being in crowds and taking part in activities where there is skin-to-skin contact, like some sports, can also increase the risk of infection.

If you have a long-term skin condition, like eczema, you are also more likely to get impetigo.

Impetigo is dangerous for babies

It's important to keep away from newborns and young babies if you have impetigo.

Impetigo is a dangerous condition for babies because their immunity has not fully developed and they can't fight infection. A severe case of impetigo could be potentially life-threatening to a newborn.

Signs and symptoms

The sores will appear 1 to 3 days after a person has been infected. That person will be able to infect other people as long as there is fluid coming out of (weeping from) the sores.

If you have impetigo, your skin will itch and redden, and a collection of blisters will form, most commonly around your nose and mouth.

When the blisters burst, a yellow, sticky fluid will weep from them. A raised and wet-looking crust will develop, and then turn into a scab. The scab will dry out and fall off, leaving the skin to completely heal.

Symptoms of severe impetigo infection

If large areas of the skin are infected, symptoms may also include:

- > fever
- > swollen lymph glands
- > generally feeling unwell (malaise).

How do I know I have impetigo?

If you or anyone in your family has any of these symptoms see your doctor for a diagnosis.

Your doctor may make a diagnosis based on what the sores look like, but may also take a swab of the blisters or crust to check for bacteria.

Treatment of impetigo

Impetigo can be treated with prescription antibiotic ointments or creams, which need to be reapplied until the sores have completely healed. Antibiotic syrups or tablets may also be prescribed. It is important to complete the course of antibiotics.

Impetigo can cause skin abscesses if left untreated.

While you have the infection

- > Wash sores with soap every 8 to 12 hours and pat them dry using a fresh towel each time.

- > Cover the sores with a waterproof dressing that doesn't have any holes in it (an occlusive dressing). You can also use a crepe bandage to hold the dressing in place. This can help stop younger children from scratching the sores.
- > Change linen (towels, sheets, face washer, sleep wear) daily while the infection is present.
- > See the doctor if sores spread and get worse or if the person becomes unwell with fever.

To stop the infection from spreading

- > Don't scratch or touch the sores.
- > Keep infected skin clean and covered.
- > Throw all used dressings in the bin as soon as you take them off. Wash your hands afterwards.
- > Wash all laundry in hot water while someone in the house has the infection.
- > Children with impetigo should be kept at home until they have antibiotic treatment for at least 24 hours or until they are no longer infectious.

How can impetigo be prevented?

You can reduce the risks of impetigo by following this advice:

- > Wash your hands with soap often, and dry them completely. Encourage others to do the same.
- > Keep children's fingernails cut short and encourage them not to scratch scabs or pick their nose.
- > Encourage children not to share their towels and face cloths.

Where to get help

- > See your doctor.
- > Visit a [GP after hours](#).
- > Ring *healthdirect Australia* on 1800 022 222.
- > [Contact your local population health unit](#).

Remember

- > Impetigo is a highly contagious bacterial skin disease.
- > The condition is dangerous for newborn babies.
- > Impetigo can be treated with antibiotics.
- > Good personal hygiene can help to prevent impetigo.

Acknowledgements
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