

How to Treat Impetigo and Control This Common Skin Infection



It's a scary sight when your child comes home from day care or elementary school with red sores and oozing fluid-filled blisters. Don't be alarmed if it's impetigo. Impetigo—one of the most common childhood diseases—can be treated with medications approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Impetigo is a common bacterial skin infection that can produce blisters or sores anywhere on the body, but usually on the face (around the nose and mouth), neck, hands, and diaper area. It's contagious, preventable, and



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manageable with antibiotics, says pediatrician Thomas D. Smith, MD, of FDA.

What Causes Impetigo

Two types of bacteria found on our skin cause impetigo: *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Streptococcus pyogenes* (which also causes strep throat). Most of us go about our lives carrying around these bacteria without a problem, Smith says. But then a minor cut, scrape or insect bite allows the bacteria to cause an infection, resulting in impetigo.

Anyone can get impetigo—and more than once, Smith says. Although impetigo is a year-round disease, it occurs most often during the warm weather months. There are more than 3 million cases of impetigo in the United States every year.

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Treating Impetigo

Look for these signs of impetigo:

- itchy red sores that fill with fluid and then burst open, forming a yellow crust
- itchy rash
- fluid-filled blisters

If you see those symptoms, visit your health care provider. Impetigo is usually treated with topical or oral antibiotics. If you have multiple lesions or if there is an outbreak, your doctor might prescribe an oral antibiotic. There is no over-the-counter (OTC) treatment for impetigo.

Controlling and Preventing Impetigo

Untreated, impetigo often clears up on its own after a few days or weeks, Smith says. The key is to keep the infected

area clean with soap and water and not to scratch it. The downside of not treating impetigo is that some people might develop more lesions that spread to other areas of their body.

And you can infect others. “To spread impetigo, you need fairly close contact—not casual contact—with the infected person or the objects they touched,” he says. Avoid spreading impetigo to other people or other parts of your body by:

- Cleaning the infected areas with soap and water.
- Loosely covering scabs and sores until they heal.
- Gently removing crusty scabs.
- Washing your hands with soap and water after touching infected areas or infected persons.

Because impetigo spreads by skin-to-skin contact, there often are small outbreaks within a family or a classroom, Smith says. Avoid touching objects that someone with impetigo has used, such as utensils, towels, sheets, clothing and toys. If you have impetigo, keep your fingernails short so the bacteria can't live under your nails and spread. Also, don't scratch the sores.

Call your health care provider if the symptoms don't go away or if there are signs the infection has worsened, such as fever, pain, or increased swelling. 

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