

Impetigo

Overview

Impetigo is a skin condition caused by bacterial infection, either "staph" (Staphylococcus) or "strep" (Group A Streptococcus). It usually starts as a blister or pustule, which rapidly ruptures leaving a distinctive honey-coloured crust. There are usually multiple spots. It can occur on any part of the skin. It tends to be itchy rather than painful and children who have it usually remain well in themselves.

The sores may follow insect bites or skin injuries or can just happen spontaneously on previously healthy skin. It is common in children who have eczema. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more prone to strep infections than other ethnicities in Australia.

Impetigo may look nasty, however, it is usually not dangerous and won't leave scars, but it is highly contagious. Antibiotics are required to treat it.

Impetigo most often affects children and is spread by touch: children scratching themselves spread it over their own skin and touching other children can spread it from person to person. This is made easier in schools and childcare centres where there is often close contact between children. Because of this it is sometimes known as 'school sores'. It is recommended that children with the blisters stay at home until they have had two days of treatment with antibiotics. Sores can be covered with a waterproof dressing.

The sores don't usually leave scars. However rare though it is, if the cause was a strep infection, there can be serious long-term effects on kidneys (glomerulonephritis). If there is any concern about the kidneys, urine is examined under a microscope and blood is sent for a kidney check.

Therefore all children with impetigo should have a skin swab performed by their doctor for two reasons: to find out if they have strep infection and to make sure the antibiotics they are given are correct for their particular infection.

Symptoms

There are three types of impetigo: bullous, non-bullous and ulcerative (also called ecthyma). Non-bullous impetigo is the most common

form. In this case, crusted, itchy sores with a golden crust occur on the skin.

Bullous impetigo causes large blisters. The blisters quickly and easily pop to reveal an oozing red base. This base then crusts over with a yellow material.

Ecthyma is usually caused by strep and looks like ulcers and sores. Unlike non-bullous and bullous impetigo, it is sore rather than itchy.

The infection can be spread by touching clothes, bedding or towels that have been in contact with an infected person.

It is quite common for impetigo to come back after treatment. This is because other family members or the patient themselves may be harbouring staph or strep without having

By: Dr Kathy Kramer, GP, Coffs Harbour
Reviewed By: A/Prof Gayle Fischer, Sydney Medical School, The University of Sydney
symptoms. If impetigo recurs, you should return to see your doctor immediately. This situation is managed by treating all family members with antiseptic washes, antibiotic ointment and making sure all sheets and towels are washed in hot water.

It is important to note that impetigo can be dangerous for newborns. It is recommended the infected person is kept well away from young babies as their immune system is not strong enough to take on these types of infections. If a baby has impetigo, medical advice should be sought immediately as it can be life-threatening.

Treatment

A single sore can be treated with the antibiotic cream containing mupirocin (Bactroban). If there are multiple sores, oral antibiotics such as erythromycin, cephalexin, flucloxacillin, or dicloxacillin, are needed. A typical course of treatment lasts 7-10 days. These antibiotics are prescribed by your doctor.

Lifestyle and diet

Good hygiene and frequent handwashing are the keys to limiting the spread of impetigo.

Other measures to stop the spread include:

- Apply a waterproof dressing to stop children from touching or scratching the sores.
- Cut fingernails short to minimise areas in which the bacteria lodges.
- Wash the child's linen, towels and clothes separately in hot water.
- Wash hands with soap after touching the

sores or changing or disposing of the dressings.

Support and resources

- The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne www.rch.org.au
- MDCConsult www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Impetigo_or_school_sores

ItsMyHealth.com.au