

Abscess Care for People Who Use Drugs



NEXT Distro
STAY ALIVE, STAY SAFE.

This pamphlet does not constitute medical advice. If your abscess or wound is large, extremely painful, or smells bad, it's important to seek professional medical attention.

You should go to the doctor if:

- Your abscess or wound is growing larger and more painful, and feels hot to the touch.
- You have a fever, which can be a sign that bacteria in the wound has spread to other organs, including your heart.
- The pus coming out of your wound smells bad.
- Your abscess or wound is over a major artery. Your arteries are anywhere you can feel a pulse, including your head, neck, elbow, groin, and wrist.
- You start to see red streaks coming from the infection.
- You don't see any improvement after 5-7 days of treatment.
- You are already immunocompromised, i.e. you are living with HIV, diabetes, or cancer, or are recently recovering from Covid-19.



a mixture of dead tissue, white blood cells, and germs. Abscesses are a sign that your immune system is doing its job of fighting off unwanted bacteria!

Abscesses mostly form after skin popping, muscling a hit, or missing a vein. They usually start out looking like a hard, red bump, and may feel warmer than the surrounding healthy skin. They are usually quite painful!

All kinds of drugs can cause abscesses — their formation has more to do with how sterile your injection practices are and less to do with the kinds of drugs you are taking. The exception to this is Xylazine, which causes wounds and abscesses more frequently than other drugs, including in places where you don't inject. See our Xylazine wound care guide for more information.

Preventing Abscesses

The best way to treat abscesses is to try not to get them! You might be used to reusing your equipment. If possible, you should use new rigs, cookers, and filters every time you inject.

You should seek immediate emergency medical attention if:

- You have chest pains, chills, and/or a fever above 100.5°F.
- You feel like you might pass out, which can be a sign of low blood pressure or an infection that has spread to your heart or blood.
- Your skin around the infection begins turning black, or the discoloration or redness around it spreads quickly.



When you are injecting there are a couple of very important steps to keep in mind.

- **Wash your hands with soap and water, or use hand sanitizer.** Having clean hands while you are handling your works helps keep everything as sterile as possible.
- **Clean your injection site with an alcohol prep pad *before* you inject** Make sure to wipe only in one direction. Rubbing



What is an abscess?

Abscesses form when there is an infection below the skin. Your body tries to fight off the bacteria by making a pocket around the infection, which fills up with pus. Pus is

an alcohol prep pad back and forth will spread the dirt and germs around. Using alcohol prep pads *after* injection will prevent the blood from clotting and delay healing your injection wound. If you need to clean up your injection site after injection, consider using a BZK wipe instead. If you don't have an alcohol pad to use before injecting, use soap and water instead. Keeping your injection site clean is one of the most important things you can do to prevent infection and complications like endocarditis, a dangerous inflammation of the heart.

- **Use new, clean water every time.** Using sterile water, sterile saline, tap water, or water from a sealed bottle are the best options. If you don't have access to these, you can use an opened water bottle or water from the back of the toilet. Never use water from the toilet bowl or a stagnant puddle.
- **Use a new cotton for every shot.** Filtering helps remove particles that may cause serious blood clots. Used filters can grow mold and bacteria, which can cause issues like cotton fever and sepsis. Consider eating your old cottons — it's a win-win! You'll get the most out of your drugs with a different kind of high without risking infection or bacteria in your blood.
- **Choose your injection sites carefully and rotate often.** Your arms and legs have the best circulation — they will heal faster than other areas and are the best and safest places to inject. Remember, each little hole takes 2-3 days to heal, even if you can't see it. Slightly move your injection spot each time to give them a chance to close up and try to use different veins. It's a good idea to learn to use both hands to inject so that you can use both of your arms. If possible, avoid injecting in your wrist, groin, and neck. These areas have major arteries and many nerves. Injecting there risks serious damage, pain, and infection.

- **Avoid injecting pills, if possible.** Pills include binding agents that can cause severe damage to your veins and result in serious health issues.
- **Switch up your route of administration.** Changing the way you take your drugs, even just for a day or two, lets your veins and wounds take a break.

Treating Abscesses

If you do get an abscess there are a few things you can safely do at home in order to manage the pain and help your body heal.

It's important to treat them early on.

Catching an abscess at the beginning can lower your chances of more serious and possibly life-threatening complications developing later on.

No matter what, **do not squeeze or cut your abscesses open at home.** You could cut into blood vessels and introduce more bacteria into the wound. Squeezing can be really tempting, but can also spread the infection into your bloodstream.

When you have an abscess, inject above it (closer to your heart) so that it can heal without substances and bacteria passing through the infection.

The steps for treating your abscess differ depending on if it is open or closed. Be sure to read these instructions carefully to make sure you are treating your wound appropriately.

Treating Your Abscess BEFORE It Begins to Drain

Ideally, you will start to treat your abscess when it is a closed, firm, red bump.

1. **Wash your hands with soap and water.**
2. **Draw a circle around the outer edge of the swollen area.** If the abscess gets bigger than the circle in the next 24-48 hours, it's a sign that you should see a doctor.

- 3. Hold a hot compress on the abscess 3-4 times a day, for 10-15 minutes at a time, or soak it in warm water.** Heat helps bring the infection to the surface, reducing the wound's pain and pressure. You can use a hot washcloth, hand warmers, or a heating pad, though be careful not to burn yourself. Cut socks can be used to wrap a hot compress on the wound. You can make your own heating pad by placing uncooked rice in a clean cotton sock, tying off the end, and microwaving it for a minute at a time, until it is warm to the touch.

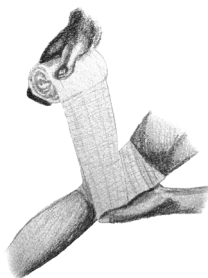


- 4. Elevate the abscess a few times a day.** A good time to do this is while you're using your hot compresses! Elevation helps decrease inflammation and swelling.
- 5. Apply antibiotic ointment, but only if the abscess is not open or draining pus.** Topical antibiotics won't heal the abscess but they can help superficial infections from spreading further. Don't use antimicrobials like alcohol pads or hydrogen peroxide.
- 6. Cover your abscess with a clean, dry bandage, or wrap it with gauze.** Change these dressings often. If they get dirty, use saline or warm water to pull them off, so you don't damage healing tissues.

Treating Your Abscess Once it Has Begun to Drain

Over time, your abscess might develop a head and start to drain on its own.

- 1. Wash your hands with soap and water.**
- 2. Stop soaking and using hot compresses once it has begun to drain.**
- 3. Continue to keep your wound covered and frequently change the dressing.** The liquid that comes out of an abscess is full of bacteria. Put anything that has touched this drained fluid in a plastic bag and put it in the trash.



Do not use antibiotic cream, alcohol pads, or hydrogen peroxide on these open wounds.

- 4. Keep an eye on the size.** If the abscess is getting smaller than the circle you drew around it, that's a good sign! You should also see it turning less red and becoming less swollen. If the pus that is draining doesn't smell bad and you don't see red streaks coming from the wound, you don't have to see a doctor. If the site starts to change color to green, purple or black, or smells really bad, go to the ER immediately. You may be at risk for more serious complications.

Treating Your Abscess AFTER It Has Drained

An abscess still has more healing to do after it has drained. But once your wound has finished draining, you're in the home stretch! Taking these steps will help you avoid track marks and scars from your infection.

- 1. Wash your hands with soap and water.**
- 2. Clean the area around the abscess with a BZK towelette.**
- 3. Rinse the abscess with soap and water or saline.**
- 4. Gently dry the abscess and let it air out for about 20 minutes.**
- 5. Cover abscess with gauze and band-aids.**
- 6. Repeat twice a day until your wound has healed.**

Using Antibiotics

Many people ask when or if they need antibiotics. If you are otherwise healthy and the abscess is smaller than 2 cm (the size of a penny, one of the cookers included in our kits, or a bottle cap), you probably don't need antibiotics. You may still need to go to the doctor for them to perform an incision and drainage. If you have a fever, multiple abscesses, have had endocarditis, and/or have HIV, diabetes or are immunocompromised, you will probably need antibiotics.

If your doctor prescribes antibiotics, make sure you take the entire prescription, even if you start to feel better. Do not share antibiotics with others — what works for you may not work for someone else. If your wounds are not improving after 24-48 hours of antibiotics, you may need to try a different medication, or in the case of severe infection, intravenous antibiotics.

Xylazine-Related Wounds

If you suspect that your wounds are related to Xylazine being present in your drug supply, treatment may vary. See our Xylazine 101 handout that was included in your welcome packet for guidance around their treatment.

Possible Infection-Related Complications

If your wound is not improving with at-home care it is important to see a doctor. Common possible life-threatening conditions that cannot be treated at home include:

- **Cellulitis:** Symptoms include swollen, red or dark purple, hot, and tender spots, with skin changing to have a rougher texture like the skin of an orange or a grapefruit
- **MRSA/Staph/Strep:** These can be spread when works are shared by multiple people. Symptoms include boils, oozing blisters, fever, and joint/muscle pain.
- **Endocarditis, or inflammation of the heart:** Symptoms include chills, fatigue, aches, night sweats, difficulty breathing, paleness, swelling of feet, cough, weight loss, and bloody urine. Heart failure can occur in extreme cases.
- **Sepsis, or blood poisoning:** Symptoms include confusion, shortness of breath, coldness, and shivering. Red streaks coming from the wound are a sign of sepsis. Early treatment is extremely important.

There are also some less common complications, which also require immediate emergency treatment:

- **Osteomyelitis:** A bone infection that travels through the blood. Symptoms include swelling, redness, pain, fever, fatigue, and chills.
- **Necrotizing Fasciitis, or flesh-eating disease:** Symptoms include wounds turning black or purple with quickly spreading redness, feeling sick, having a fever, and/or confusion.
- **Wound Botulism:** This very rare complication is usually associated with black tar use. A bacteria produces a toxin on the injection site that eventually stops your breathing via muscle paralysis. Symptoms include droopy eyelids, blurred or double vision, and a dry, sore throat which may progress into difficulty speaking and swallowing. You may also experience weakness of the neck, arms, and legs, and difficulty breathing. If untreated, wound botulism will cause death. Early treatment is important.
- **Deep Vein Thrombosis:** This is caused when a blood clot forms in a vein. Symptoms include heat, pain, swelling, and/or redness near the injection site. DVT can lead to heart attack or stroke if it is left untreated.

If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, please seek medical attention or call 911.

Remember, abscesses are preventable and usually manageable at home. Do your best to use fresh works every time, never share your works, and rotate your injection sites. You can always ask us questions about wound care and safe injection practices by texting or emailing us, or including it on your order.