

"Flesh-Eating Disease" (Necrotizing Fasciitis)

What is Flesh Eating Disease?

Flesh-eating disease is also called necrotizing fasciitis. It is an infection that rapidly destroys tissue through the layers that surrounds muscles. If left untreated, it can cause death within 12 to 24 hours. It is estimated that there are between 90 and 200 cases per year in Canada, and about 20-30% of these are fatal. Flesh-eating disease can be caused by a number of different bacteria, including group A streptococcus (GAS), a very common bacteria. Many people carry GAS bacteria in the throat or on their skin without getting sick. It is the same bacteria that causes strep throat, and can also cause impetigo, scarlet fever and rheumatic fever. In rare instances, GAS will cause serious illnesses, including pneumonia, meningitis, blood poisoning, and streptococcal toxic-shock syndrome.

What are signs and symptoms of Flesh Eating Disease?

The symptoms of flesh-eating disease include a high fever, and a red, severely painful swelling that feels hot and spreads rapidly. The skin may become purplish and then go black and die. There may be extensive tissue destruction. Sometimes the swelling starts at the site of a minor injury, such as a small cut or bruise, but in other cases there is no obvious source of infection.

Risk factors

- A weakened immune system, which could be caused by such factors as disease (HIV infection, AIDS), cancer treatments (radiation and chemotherapy), or by taking anti-rejection drugs following an organ or bone-marrow transplant;
- Chronic diseases, including heart, lung or liver disease;
- Recent close contact with someone who has flesh-eating disease that was caused by GAS; and
- Chickenpox- it should be noted, however, that while flesh-eating disease is a complication of chickenpox in children, very few children with chickenpox will develop flesh-eating disease.

Keep in mind that flesh-eating disease is very rare. Your chance of getting it is low, even when these risk factors are present.

What is the treatment?

Because flesh-eating disease progresses so rapidly, treatment usually involves surgery to remove the infected tissue and antibiotics to fight the infection. There is no vaccine to prevent flesh-eating disease.

Minimize your risk!

- Seek immediate medical attention if you have the symptoms of flesh-eating disease.
- If you have been in close contact with someone who has flesh-eating disease caused by GAS, consult your doctor. It may be a good idea to take antibiotics as a precaution.
- Take proper care of minor wounds and cuts. Wash the affected area in warm soapy water, and keep it clean and dry with a bandage.

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns.

For further information contact the Infectious Disease Program at
625-8318 or toll free 1-888-294-6630 ex. 8318

or Health Canada: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/flesh-chair-eng.php>

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