

## ***What should I not do?***

- **DO NOT** shoot into or near an abscess.
- **DO NOT** squeeze or cut into an abscess. You could push germs into your bloodstream.

This could “seed” your heart lining with bacteria that can cause an infection to grow in your heart. This is called endocarditis, and it’s a life-threatening condition.

People with weak immune systems are more likely to have abscesses. If you have a weak immune system, you need to be even more careful.

## ***Other Facts***

If you have a bad infection, you may need to take antibiotics. If your doctor prescribes antibiotics, be sure to finish them ALL—even if you feel better before they’re used up. If you don’t take them correctly, the germs they are supposed to treat can develop resistance.

## ***Where do I go for help?***

- Go to your doctor
- Get free or low-cost treatment at the community clinics.

*Please see the “Community Resources & Services” pamphlet for more info.*

## **NOTES**

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# **ABSCESSES**

# Abscesses

## ***What is an abscess?***

An abscess is a pocket of pus.

Pus means you have an infection. Pus is made of dead tissue, germs (bacteria), and white blood cells. The white blood cells rally around to kill the germs. Sometimes, abscesses will burst and drain, a way the body has of getting rid of the infection.



Skin abscess (inner forearm)  
Source: Doctors Gate, 2011

## ***What causes an abscess?***

An abscess can start anywhere in the body where bacteria infects tissue. Drug shooters often get abscesses on their arms or legs—mostly (but not always) at injection sites. You are more likely to damage tissue and develop an abscess when you “skin pop,” “muscle it,” or miss your vein. Both the cut and the drug itself can cause infection and damage tissue. You can even get an abscess **AFTER** you stop injecting.

## ***What signs should I look for?***

A hard, reddish, tender lump. It will usually appear at the injection site, but it can also pop up in other places. The lump might feel warmer than the skin around it. It might even feel hot. It usually hurts. It might look pink and puffy. If it gets bigger, the infection is getting worse. As the infection spreads, you might see red streaks spreading out and away from the abscess. The infection might make you feel tired or cause fever or chills. You might have chest pains if the infection goes to your heart or lungs.

## ***What should I do if I get an abscess?***

It depends on how bad it is.

Treat at **HOME** with a **HOT SOAK** if:

- You don't have any red streaks or hot puffy skin around it.

### **How do I hot soak?**

- Soak the abscess in a tub of plain hot water. *This works well if the abscess is on your hand or lower arm.*

- Better yet, soak it in hot water and Epsom Salts.
- Make sure the water is hot, but not so hot that it burns your skin.
- Hold a hot, wet wash cloth over the abscess, if the abscess is in a spot; you can't easily put under water.
- Soak at least 3 or 4 times a day, 10 to 15 minutes each time.

Go to a **CLINIC** if:

- It has not improved after 5 to 7 days.
- The lump gets bigger or more painful.
- You see red streaks spreading out from the lump.
- The lump is hot, puffy, and pink, or if you get a fever.

Go to the **EMERGENCY ROOM** if:

- You have chest pains.
- You have chills or a high fever.
- The infection looks like it is spreading really fast.