

Impetigo

What is impetigo?

Impetigo, more commonly called 'school sores', is a very contagious (catching) skin infection. It can occur anywhere on the skin but usually affects the face, particularly around the mouth and nose. Impetigo is most common in infants and children, particularly those just starting school, but can affect adults.

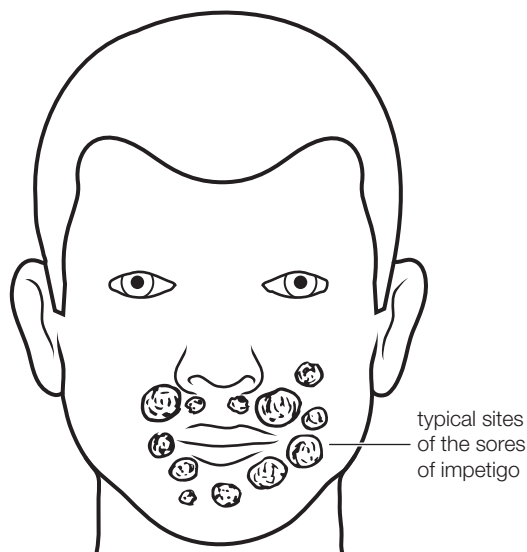
What is the cause?

Impetigo is caused by two strains of bacteria, called *Streptococcus* and *Staphylococcus aureus*, which is the most common cause. Those with sensitive skin, lowered resistance from illness, poor hygiene and poor nutrition have an increased risk of infection. The risk also increases with warm, humid weather and in crowded living conditions.

What are the symptoms?

Impetigo usually commences with a small patch of tiny blisters around the mouth and nose. These break open to form a weeping area of red skin which soon develops a golden crust. It then spreads from the edges and forms new infected patches. This spread can be very rapid.

Impetigo can occur in other areas on the body, especially around the buttocks, legs and arms. The blisters and crust of impetigo are not painful but they may itch. A skin swab and culture will confirm the responsible germ.



What are the risks?

It is not a serious disease although infection with *Streptococcus* can lead to a serious kidney disease called glomerulonephritis. It can be very serious if it occurs in newborn infants when the rapidly spreading infection will cause them to become very ill.

What should be done to prevent spread?

It is important to treat impetigo as soon as possible and to take measures to prevent its spread within the family and to others. Patients should have their own towel, soap and face towels and never share them (disposable paper towels are useful). All family members should use an anti-bacterial soap. Fingernails should be cut short and the picking of sores avoided. If necessary, cover the sores with gauze and tape with a watertight dressing to keep hands off them. Infected adults should wash their hands thoroughly in an antiseptic before preparing food. Keep bed linen, clothes and towels separate. Children should be kept away from school or other child-care settings until the skin has completely healed.

What is the treatment?

Your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic or antiseptic (which is preferable) lotion. It is important to wash the affected area three times daily with an antibacterial soap and gently sponge off any crusts with warm salty water. Then apply an antiseptic lotion such as chlorhexidine or povidone-iodine (Betadine). Wash the hands carefully after this treatment. This method should cure most mild cases. A topical antibiotic ointment such as Bactroban may be prescribed for a few small persistent spots. Apply the ointment with a cotton wool swab. For more severe cases, penicillin-type antibiotics taken by mouth will be needed.