

## Necrotizing Fasciitis

Recent news reports have brought Necrotizing Fasciitis (neck-ro-tie-zing Fas-e-i-tis) or “flesh eating bacteria” to the public’s attention due to the report of a case after canoeing on the Little Miami River. Necrotizing Fasciitis can be caused by several types of bacteria. These bacteria include group A Streptococcus (group A strep), *Escherichia coli* (E. coli), and *Staphylococcus aureus* (staph). Group A strep is the most common cause.

Necrotizing fasciitis is a serious bacterial skin infection that spreads quickly and kills the body’s soft tissue. (Necrotizing means “causing the death of tissues.”) Unfortunately, necrotizing fasciitis can be deadly in a very short amount of time. Accurate diagnosis, prompt antibiotic treatment (medicine that kills bacteria in the body), and surgery are important to stopping this infection.

Does this mean that I should not canoe on the Little Miami River or that there is an issue with the quality of water on the Little Miami River? The answer is no, you can still canoe on the river, and the water quality has not been compromised, but there are some precautions that can be taken.

### Take Precautions Prior to Contact with Rivers, Lakes, Streams and Ponds

- If you have an open sore or cut make sure you cover the wound with a water proof bandage prior to going into a river, stream, lake, or pond.
- Ensure that you shower quickly after swimming in any rivers, lakes, streams or ponds. Swimming in these bodies of water can contain naturally occurring bacteria and other microorganisms that can lead to an illness.
- If you notice a cut or sore has become infected after swimming or coming into contact with a body of water see your health care professional quickly to prevent symptoms from worsening.

### Good Wound Care Is Important

Common sense and good wound care are the best ways to prevent a bacterial skin infection.

- Keep draining or open wounds covered with clean, dry bandages until healed.
- Don’t delay first aid of even minor, non-infected wounds (like blisters, scrapes, or any break in the skin).
- Avoid spending time in whirlpools, hot tubs, swimming pools, and natural bodies of water (e.g., lakes, rivers, oceans) if you have an open wound or skin infection.
- Wash hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub if washing is not possible.

### People Rarely Spread Necrotizing Fasciitis to Other People

In general, someone with necrotizing fasciitis does not spread the infection to other people. Most cases of necrotizing fasciitis occur randomly. The most common way of getting necrotizing fasciitis is when the bacteria enter the body through a break in the skin. This can include cuts, scrapes, burns, insect bites, or puncture wounds.

## While Rare, Some People Are More Likely to Get Necrotizing Fasciitis

Necrotizing fasciitis is rare. Your chances of getting it are extremely low if you have a strong immune system and practice good hygiene and proper wound care.

Most people who get necrotizing fasciitis have other health problems that may lower their body's ability to fight infection. Some of these conditions include:

- Diabetes
- Kidney disease
- Cancer
- Other chronic health conditions that weaken the body's immune system

## Symptoms Start Quickly, But Can Often Be Confusing

People with necrotizing fasciitis often start having symptoms within a few hours after an injury. The symptoms may seem like another illness or injury. For example, some people may complain of pain or soreness, similar to that of a "pulled muscle." The skin may be warm with red or purplish areas of swelling that spread rapidly. Some people get ulcers, blisters, or black spots on the skin. Patients often describe their pain as severe and hurting much more than they would expect based on how the wound looks. Later symptoms can include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Vomiting

These confusing symptoms may delay a person from seeking medical attention. **If you have these symptoms after a wound, see a doctor right away.**

## People with Necrotizing Fasciitis Need Prompt Treatment

The first line of defense against this disease is strong antibiotics given through a needle into a vein (IV antibiotics). Antibiotics may not reach all of the infected and dying areas if toxins destroy soft tissue and reduce blood flow. This is why doctors often use surgery—in addition to antibiotics—to remove dead tissue. This surgery is often critical to stop the infection and must happen quickly.