

# Group A Streptococcal (GAS) Infection

## (strep throat, necrotizing fasciitis, impetigo)

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*This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.*

### **What is GAS infection?**

GAS bacteria are often found in the throat and on the skin. People may carry group A streptococci in the throat or on the skin and have no symptoms of illness. These bacteria commonly cause “strep throat,” or impetigo (bacterial infection of the skin). On rare occasions, these bacteria can cause other severe and even life-threatening diseases.

### **How is it spread?**

These bacteria are spread through direct contact with mucus from the nose or throat of persons who are infected or through contact with infected wounds or sores on the skin. Ill persons, such as those who have strep throat or skin infections, are most likely to spread the infection. Persons who carry the bacteria but have no symptoms are much less contagious. Treating an infected person with an antibiotic for 24 hours or longer generally eliminates their ability to spread the bacteria. However it is important to complete the entire course of antibiotics as prescribed.

These bacteria are normally passed from person to person through close personal contact with an infected person, such as through kissing, sharing drinking cups, forks, spoons or cigarettes.

### **What kinds of illnesses are caused by GAS infection?**

Infection with GAS can result in a range of conditions:

- No illness
- Mild to moderate illness (skin infection such as impetigo or strep throat)
- Severe illness. Sometimes life-threatening, GAS disease may occur when bacteria get into parts of the body where bacteria usually are not found, such as the blood, muscle, or the lungs. (necrotizing fasciitis, sometimes referred to as flesh eating disease, streptococcal toxic shock syndrome)

### **What are your chances of getting “invasive” GAS infection?**

In general, the chances of getting “invasive” GAS infection are low. Normally in Canada, millions of children get strep throat each year, but less than 1 in a million develop invasive GAS infection. In Yukon, only a few cases of GAS infection have ever been diagnosed.

### **Why does invasive GAS disease occur?**

Invasive GAS infections occur when the bacteria get past the normal disease defense mechanisms of the person who is infected. This may occur when a person has sores or other breaks in the skin that allow the bacteria to get into the tissue, or when the person’s ability to fight off the infection is decreased because of chronic illness or an illness that affects the immune system. Also, some types of GAS are more likely to cause severe disease than others and these are referred to as virulent strains.

### **Who is most at risk of getting invasive GAS disease?**

Few people who come in contact with GAS will develop invasive GAS disease. Most people will have a throat or skin infection, and some may have no symptoms at all, although healthy people can get invasive GAS disease.

### **The following increase the possibility of acquiring invasive GAS infections:**

- Sharing “rigs” or needles;
- Skin wounds (burns, trauma, surgery);
- A weakened immune system due to disease (e.g. people with HIV infection or AIDS; people on cancer treatments; organ transplant people receiving anti-rejection drugs.);
- Other chronic diseases (e.g. heart, lung or liver diseases);
- Alcoholism;
- Recent close contact with a person who had an “invasive” group A streptococcus infection.

### **Early signs and symptoms of necrotizing fasciitis:**

- Fever
- Redness (which rapidly spreads) of the skin at the infected site
- Severe pain and swelling

### **Early signs and symptoms of STSS:**

- Fever
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- A flat red rash over large areas of the body

### **How is invasive GAS disease treated?**

GAS infections can be treated with many different antibiotics. Early treatment may reduce the risk of death from invasive GAS disease. However, even the best medical care does not prevent death in every case. For those with very severe illness, supportive treatment in an intensive care unit may be needed. For persons with necrotizing fasciitis, surgery often is needed to remove damaged tissue.

### **How can it be prevented?**

There is no vaccine to prevent GAS infections. Antibiotics may be recommended for close contacts of people with certain types of invasive infection.

### **To reduce the spread of GAS bacteria:**

- Hand washing, especially after coughing or sneezing and before preparing foods and eating.
- Taking good care of cuts or other skin lesions to reduce the risk of infection. (If you have a cut or other skin lesion, wash it well in warm soapy water, keep it clean and watch for signs of infection such as redness, swelling, drainage, pain and fever.)
- Seek medical attention if signs of spreading infection are present.
- If you have a severe sore throat, seek medical attention; persons diagnosed with strep throat should stay home from work, school, or daycare until antibiotics have been taken for 24 hours.

**Contact Information**

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.

***Revised and adopted from:***

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/flesh-chair\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/flesh-chair_e.html)

[http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/groupastreptococcal\\_g.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/groupastreptococcal_g.htm)