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Patient information: Osteomyelitis (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is osteomyelitis? — Osteomyelitis is an infection of the bone. It can cause pain and other symptoms.

A bone can get infected if there are germs in the blood or nearby tissues. A bone can also get infected following a serious injury that exposes the bone.

What are the symptoms of osteomyelitis? — The main symptom is dull pain in the infected body part. The infected area might also be tender, warm, red, or swollen, but often pain is the only symptom. In some cases, osteomyelitis causes no symptoms.

Is there a test for osteomyelitis? — Yes. If your doctor or nurse thinks you have osteomyelitis, he or she will order a bone biopsy. During a bone biopsy, a doctor takes a small sample of bone to send to the lab. The bone sample can be taken with a needle or by doing surgery. Often the best way to get a good bone sample is through surgery. It's important to get a good sample, because knowing what kind of germ is causing the infection can help doctors choose the right treatment.

In some cases, doctors find osteomyelitis on an X-ray or other test that shows pictures of the bone. But even if they find it this way, doctors usually follow up with a bone biopsy.

How is osteomyelitis treated? — Treatment usually starts with surgery to remove dead and damaged bone and tissue. Sometimes surgeons also use screws, plates, or other pieces of "hardware" to support the damaged bone.

People being treated for osteomyelitis must get antibiotic medicines for at least 6 weeks. These are usually given through a tube that goes into a vein, called an "intravenous catheter." Treatment usually starts while the person is in the hospital. Then, after the person is released, he or she must keep getting antibiotic treatments. This can happen at a rehab facility or at home with the help of a visiting nurse.

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