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New Zealand confirms skin infections as cause of rheumatic fever

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The study's findings have huge implications for the prevention of acute rheumatic fever

Researchers at University of Otago in New Zealand have made a major breakthrough in further understanding acute rheumatic fever, showing that skin infections are likely to be a significant cause of the disease.

Acute rheumatic fever is an important cause of serious heart disease, particularly in New Zealand and for many children and young people in low and middle-income countries.

It has long been recognised that rheumatic fever is a complication of group A streptococcus (GAS) pharyngitis, commonly known as "strep throat". However, new research just published in the scientific journal BMJ Global Health, indicates that streptococcus skin infections can also trigger the disease.

It is the world's first study to confirm that the risk of rheumatic fever rises after a GAS skin infection in a similar way to how it does after a GAS sore throat.

"We are planning a trial of more intensive skin infection treatment to see if this can reduce the risk of developing rheumatic fever," researchers say.

The study also reveals that dispensing a course of oral antibiotics, which is the routine treatment for children following a strep throat diagnosis, was not associated with a reduced risk of developing rheumatic fever.