

Blisters

A blister is a small pocket of fluid in the upper skin layers and is one of the body's responses to injury or pressure. The feet are particularly prone to blisters. Ill-fitting shoes or friction can damage the skin, and a blister forms to cushion the area from further damage as it heals. The body gradually absorbs the fluid as the underlying skin recovers. This can take around one week or so.

Depending on the cause and location, a blister can range from the size of a pinprick to three centimetres or more in diameter. A blood blister is usually caused by a severe pinch or bruise to the skin that breaks the tiny blood vessels (capillaries).

Symptoms of a blister

The symptoms include:

- Reddened and tender skin patch
- Raised lump filled with clear fluid
- Sometimes, the lump is filled with blood.

Causes of blisters

A blister is usually the body's attempt to cushion the underlying skin tissues from further damage during the healing process. Some common causes of blisters include:

- Ill-fitting shoes
- Friction (for example, using a shovel all day without gloves can cause blisters on the palms of the hands)
- Scalds or burns
- Severe sunburn
- Allergic reaction to irritants
- Viral skin infection (such as herpes/warts)
- Fungal skin infection (such as tinea on the soles of the feet or between the toes).

Self-help for blisters

Blisters rarely need medical attention, unless they are severe, recurrent, caused by burns or indicative of an underlying infection. Suggestions for treating a simple friction blister yourself include:

- Resist the temptation to burst the blister. You could cause an infection or hinder your body's healing process.
- If the blister has burst, don't peel off the baggy skin pocket – let your body heal the area in its own way and in its own time.
- Frequently wash the area with salt water and keep it free from dirt or irritants.
- If the site of the blister makes it vulnerable to popping (for example, a blister on your foot may be broken by the friction of socks or shoes), pad it with a soft dressing, securely taped. Make sure the middle part of the dressing doesn't stick to the blister itself.
- Don't use tape alone, as removing the tape may rip the skin off the blister.
- Change the dressing daily.
- If the blister breaks, press gently to remove the fluid and apply an antiseptic (such as iodine) to reduce the risks of infection.
- Avoid 'folk remedies' like applying butter or vinegar. These don't work.

Seek medical attention

See your doctor or other health professional for treatment if:

- The blister is caused by burns, scalds or severe sunburn
- The blister starts weeping pus (yellow or green, sometimes smelly, fluid)
- The area becomes increasingly swollen or inflamed
- You suspect the blister is caused by some type of skin infection or allergic reaction.

Medical treatment for blisters

Depending on the cause, treatment may include:

- Proper and sterile drainage of fluid
- Professional dressing or padding techniques
- Antibiotics, in the case of a bacterial infection
- Antifungal preparations, in the case of fungal infection
- Antiviral preparations, in the case of viral infection
- Treatment for any underlying allergy.

Prevention of blisters

Prevention strategies include:

- Wear properly fitted shoes.
- Choose moisture-wicking socks (socks that draw sweat away from your feet) or change socks twice daily if you have sweaty feet, as wet socks cause friction and rubbing.
- Wear 'sports socks' when exercising or playing sports.
- If you become aware of a localised 'hot' area on your foot, stop your sport and tape the area immediately.
- Apply a foot spray deodorant to reduce sweating and therefore the risk of fungal infection.
- Change damp socks promptly, as wet socks can drag against the skin.
- Wear heavy-duty work gloves when using tools such as shovels or picks.
- Protect yourself against sunburn with clothing, hats and sunscreen lotions.
- Avoid unnecessary skin contact with chemicals.
- Be careful when dealing with steam, flames or objects that radiate heat (such as electric stovetops).

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Podiatrist
- Pharmacist.

Things to remember

- A blister is a small pocket of fluid in the upper skin layers and is one of the body's responses to injury or friction.
- The feet are particularly prone to blisters.
- Blisters rarely need medical attention unless they are severe, recurrent, caused by burns or indicative of an underlying infection.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

La Trobe University - Department of Podiatry

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