

Boils and skin infections are usually caused by bacteria. Avoid sharing items and wash hands thoroughly, especially after touching skin infections.

Boils and skin infections

What are Boils?

A boil is an infection of the skin, usually caused by *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria (commonly known as golden staph). Many healthy people carry these bacteria on their skin or in their nose, but do not get infections. Boils occur when bacteria get through broken skin and causes tender, swollen sores, which are full of pus.

Other skin infections such as impetigo may be caused by staph bacteria. Impetigo, commonly known as school sores (as they affect school-age children), are small blisters or flat crusty sores on the skin. When the blisters rupture they release a yellow fluid and develop honey-coloured crusts.

How are they spread?

Boils and other skin infections are spread between people by:

- squeezing, scratching or through contact with an infected area
- using unwashed clothes, towels, or bed sheets that have been used by a person with a skin infection
- using grooming items (eg nail scissors, tweezers, and razors) that have been used by a person with a skin infection
- not washing hands carefully

How can you stop the spread?

1. Hand washing is important to prevent the spread of boils and skin infections. You should thoroughly wash all parts of your hands with soap and running water for 10-15 seconds
 - before & after touching/dressing an infected area
 - before handling or eating food
 - after going to the toilet
 - after blowing your nose
 - after touching or handling unwashed clothing or linen

2. Keep cuts, scrapes, and boils clean and covered to avoid infection
3. Don't share personal items such as clothes, towels, or bed sheets (if you share a bed with someone, keep sores or wounds covered overnight) or grooming items such as nail scissors, tweezers, razors and toothbrushes
4. Wash bed linen and clothing regularly

How are they diagnosed?

Most skin infections are diagnosed on the basis of their appearance and the presence of any related symptoms (eg fever). Your doctor may take swabs or samples from boils, wounds, or other sites of infection to identify the bacteria responsible. Some infections may be caused by bacteria that are resistant to some antibiotics. See the *MRSA in the community factsheet* for detailed information on infections caused by antibiotic resistant strains.

How are they treated?

Keep boils or other skin infections clean and covered

- bathe the boil or sore with soap and water or a salt water mixture
- apply a hot compress to encourage the boil to come to a head
- keep boils and other skin infections covered and change regularly

Do not squeeze boils

- Drainage of skin boils or abscesses should only be performed by a doctor or trained nurse or health worker
- In some circumstances infections may require treatment with antibiotics

If the sores spread or get worse, or the person becomes unwell with fever, see your doctor for further advice on treatment. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics (by mouth or as an ointment). It is important to follow the recommended treatment and finish the full course of antibiotics.

What is the public health response?

Boils and skin infections are not notifiable in NSW. Public health units can advise on the control of outbreaks.

Further information - Public Health Units in NSW



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