

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

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What are boils?

A boil (sometimes known as a furuncle) is an infection of the skin, often around a hair follicle. It is 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 have any symptoms. Boils occur when bacteria get through broken skin and cause tender, swollen, pimple-like sores, which are full of pus. Boils usually get better on their own, but severe or recurring cases may require medical treatment and support.

Staph bacteria may also cause other skin infections, including impetigo. [Impetigo](#), commonly known as school sores (as they affect school-age children), are small blisters or flat crusty sores on the skin. See the [Impetigo](#) factsheet at <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/impetigo.aspx> for specific information on Impetigo.

How are they diagnosed?

Most skin infections are diagnosed on the basis of their appearance and the presence of any related symptoms (such as 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 dressing regularly

Do not squeeze boils as this may cause the infection to spread

- 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 you become unwell with fever, see your doctor. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics (by mouth or as an ointment). It is very important to follow the recommended treatment and finish the full course of antibiotics.

How are they spread?

Boils and other skin infections are spread between people by:

- Direct contact with an infected area or spread of the bacteria on hands or items that have been in contact with an infected area.
- Not washing your hands properly and sharing items such as used towels, bedding, and grooming items such as razors can increase the risk of spread.

How can you help stop the spread?

While you have the infection

- Good hand washing is really 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 and after touching/dressing an infected area and before handling or eating food
 - After going to the toilet
 - After blowing your nose
 - After touching or handling used clothing or linen
- Keep cuts, scrapes, and boils clean and covered to avoid infection
- Don't share personal items such as clothes, towels, bed sheets (if you share a bed with someone, keep sores or wounds covered overnight), razors and toothbrushes and disinfect/wash grooming items thoroughly after each use, such as nail scissors, tweezers,
- Wash bed linen and clothing regularly, and dry in the dryer or outside in the sun.

To prevent boils and skin infections children should be encouraged:

- To wash their hands often with soap. Resources on handwashing can be found at <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines-publications/ch55>.
- To not scratch scabs or pick their nose
- To not share their clothes, towels, or toothbrushes
- To have scratches and cuts cleaned and covered

In addition to general hygiene measures, specific measures to prevent spread in schools and childcare include:

- Teachers, children and families should understand the importance of good hand washing, covering sores and staying home if sick,
- Hand washing products (soap dispensers, running water and paper towels) should be available and accessible,
- Activities should allow time for hand washing as part of routine practice (before eating and after going to the toilet),
- Surfaces such as counters, desks and toys that come in contact with uncovered or poorly covered infections, should be cleaned daily with water & detergent, and whenever visibly contaminated.
- School exclusion is not recommended except for some children with Impetigo. See the [Impetigo](#) factsheet for further information.

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.

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055