

Boils and Carbuncles

Boils and carbuncles are painful, pus-filled bumps that form under your skin when bacteria infect and inflame one or more of your hair follicles. Carbuncles is the name given to a cluster of boils. Carbuncles tend to cause deeper, more severe infections than boils.

Q: What causes Boils and carbuncles?

A: Boils and carbuncles are caused by a hair follicle becoming infected with bacteria.

Q: How do you know when to see a doctor?

A: You should seek medical attention if a boil or carbuncle becomes extremely painful, lasts more than 2 weeks, or is accompanied by a fever. In some cases, cellulitis can develop around the boil or carbuncle. Cellulitis causes the skin to turn pink or red, become painful and tender to the touch. Cellulitis requires medical attention.

Q: What is the treatment?

A: Your doctor may drain the boil or carbuncle by making a small incision at the top. This releases the infected fluids, resulting in less pain and a lower risk of scarring. Deep infections that can't be completely drained may be covered with sterile gauze so that infected fluids can continue to drain. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics to treat severe or recurrent infections.

Q. Is there anything I can do to help the healing process?

A. The following steps may help a boil or carbuncle heal faster and avoid spreading.

- Apply a warm washcloth for at least 10 minutes every few hours. This helps the boil drain more quickly.
- Gently wash the boil at least twice a day with antibacterial soap.
- After washing, apply a topical antibiotic and cover it with a bandage.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after touching a boil.
- Launder any clothing, towels, or compresses that have touched the infected skin.

Q: Can anything be done to prevent boils?

A: Although it's not always possible to prevent boils, especially if you have a compromised immune system, the following measures may help you avoid staph infections:

- Wash your hands regularly with mild soap. Or, use an alcohol-based hand rub often. Careful hand washing is your best defense against germs.
- Thoroughly clean even small cuts and scrapes. Wash the wound well with soap and water and apply an over-the-counter antibiotic ointment.
- Keep wounds covered. Keep cuts and abrasions clean and covered with sterile bandages until they heal.
- Keep personal items personal. Avoid sharing personal items, such as towels, sheets, razors, clothing and athletic equipment. Staph infections can spread via objects, as well as from person to person.

You may be able to care for a single boil at home, but don't attempt to prick or squeeze it — that may spread the infection. If you need professional treatment, call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry (843) 689-5259 (Hilton Head) or (843) 705-0840 (Bluffton / Okatie) to schedule an appointment.