

How to treat and prevent boils

Boils are red, swollen, painful bumps under the skin. Often, they form when a hair follicle gets infected. The infection forms an abscess or pocket of pus, sometimes growing larger than a ping-pong ball. A boil can be extremely painful.

Prevention

The best ways to prevent boils are to avoid wearing tight clothing and to wash boil-prone areas often with soapy water. These areas include the face, neck, armpits, breasts, groin, and buttocks.

To avoid spreading the bacteria that causes a boil to develop, you should:

- Wash your hands frequently, especially after touching or treating a boil
- Avoid sharing personal items such as razors or towels

Home treatment

In general, if a boil is not large or excessively painful, home treatment can be effective in resolving the problem. Once a boil develops, resist the urge to squeeze, scratch, drain, or lance it. This can make the infection worse. Instead, gently wash the area well with soap and water twice a day. Dry it well, but don't rub.

You can also apply hot washcloths to the boil 3 or 4 times a day, for 20 minutes or more at a stretch. You might also try a hot water bottle or heating pad applied over a damp towel. These warm compresses can help bring the boil to a head, although the process may take 5 to 7 days. If the boil opens, keep applying the compresses for three more days. An opened boil should be covered with a bandage. Change the bandage every day. Continue cleaning the area twice a day with soap and water until the boil has drained completely and begins to heal.

When to call Kaiser Permanente

If the boil is large or excessively painful, please call your doctor or other health care professional. They can help drain the boil and treat any infection. If a boil is on your face or near your spine or anal area, you should always call your doctor.

You should also call your doctor if you get a boil and:

- The infection seems to be getting worse, with increased pain or tenderness, continued discharge of pus, or red streaks extending from the boil.
- You get a fever of 100 or higher.

- You have diabetes.
- You have a condition that compromises your immune system, such as an organ transplant or HIV infection.
- The pain from the boil keeps you from doing your normal activities.
- The boil doesn't improve after a week of home treatment.
- There is more than one boil or you develop many boils over several months.

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Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at **kp.org** to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, Healthy Living classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, Healthy Living programs, and other resources.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.