

BLISTER PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

What is a blister?

Blisters occur due to friction on the skin, usually from the rubbing of clothing or footwear on the skin surface. Over time, continued friction can cause the top layer of skin to separate from the second layer, and this 'pocket' then fills with fluid. This fluid serves to protect the skin underneath it – it cushions it until new skin forms, and is then reabsorbed back into the body.

There are usually warning signs that a blister is going to develop – these will include pain, redness and warmth locally.

How can I prevent blisters?

There are several steps you can take to prevent blisters occurring, and it is much easier, and less painful, to prevent blisters occurring than to treat existing blisters.

Shoes

- Make sure that you have 'worn your shoes in' prior to the event – **ANY** new shoe is likely to cause blisters.
- Ensure that your shoes fit correctly. Cramped shoes will cause the toes to rub against the side or ends of the shoe. This will lead to blistering and may also lead to blackened, loose toe nails. Shoes that are too large will allow your foot to slide about with each step, and this will increase friction and the risk of blistering. Ensure that your toenails are cut short prior to the event – long nails are more likely to press against the shoe liner, which may result in bruising and injury that will cause the nail to fall off.
- Correctly fitting shoes should leave a gap of approximately 1 finger width between the end of your longest toe and the end of your shoe. Be sure that you have enough space to be able to wiggle your toes inside the shoe, and that your heel does not slip within the shoe.
- Inspect the inside of your shoe for seams or worn areas that may add to friction. Consider an alternative, seamless style, or lubricate/pad the area that is getting rubbed.
- Shoes that include fabric or mesh will allow your feet to 'breathe' better than a solid leather shoe, and drier feet are less prone to blistering.

Socks

- Socks should fit comfortably without being too tight or too loose. A fitted sock is much less likely to cause problems than a 'tube' style sock, and you should ensure that your socks are not too worn – thin areas and holes are much more likely to cause blisters. Do **NOT**, however, try brand new untested socks for the event.

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- Try to use specialist walking socks, which are **NOT** made of cotton because this will absorb moisture – these will be made of soft, wicking fabric and will not contain any raised seams. There are numerous brands available.
- Some people choose to wear 2 thin pairs of socks (or a sock made of 2 layers) to aid blister prevention. Others find that using talcum, or specialised foot powder, in their socks can help reduce friction.
- Carry at least one spare pair of socks for the event – **CHANGE** your socks if your feet become sweaty or wet. If you run out of spare socks consider swapping your socks left to right. The act of changing out of wet, sweaty socks and airing your feet is one of the best ways to prevent blisters occurring.

Other Measures

- If you are prone to blisters, it is worth carrying a supply of blister prevention and treatment products with you. If you develop any 'hot spots' whilst walking you should stop and apply something immediately to prevent a blister from developing. An alternative is to apply a generous amount of petroleum jelly or talcum powder to the area to reduce friction – this will need to be re-applied frequently. It may also be worth applying plasters, padding or tape to areas that you know are prone to blistering prior to starting the walk.
- Try to ensure that you treat any pre-existing foot problems, for example athlete's foot, prior to starting the event. There are various preparations available over the counter for this.

How to treat blisters

- The vast majority of blisters, even if extensive, can be treated at home and will heal naturally without medical attention. You should expect some discomfort for a few days, and accept that your blisters will be inconvenient and may stop you going about your daily life as normal - they will take time to heal and there is nothing that can be done to speed up the healing process except rest and avoid further friction.
- The only blisters which will require medical attention are those that become infected – this complication can be prevented by washing your feet regularly, even though this will be painful. Signs of infection include warm, very red skin or red streaks around the blister, and the fluid within the blister becoming milky white, yellowish or greenish. **IF** this occurs you should visit your doctor. Any diabetic walkers that develop blisters should also seek medical advice.
- Generally, blisters should be left intact if at all possible, even if this means you are unable to wear your normal footwear. The skin covering the fluid is the best protection that a blister has against infection, and its purpose is to allow the underlying skin to heal.

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- If you feel that you **HAVE** to drain your blisters, you should do so by washing the area thoroughly, sterilising a needle by holding it over a flame until it is red hot or soaking it in a disinfectant solution, and popping the blister using the cooled, sterilised needle before gently draining the blister of fluid. Do **NOT** remove the flap of skin over the blister – this will serve as the best protection for the skin growing underneath it. Apply a dressing if you feel it is necessary, and allow it to heal naturally. Replace the dressing daily, and wash your feet thoroughly as you do so.
- Simple, absorbent, non-stick dressings are sufficient for dressing blisters, and these can be purchased from any chemist. The important thing is to change the dressings regularly and wash your feet when doing so. Small blisters can be covered with simple plasters; larger ones can be covered with a soft pad that can be taped into place.
- You may find that it helps to take simple painkillers whilst waiting for your blisters to heal, or whilst taking part in the event. Paracetamol and Ibuprofen are both effective options. If you do use painkillers, **DO NOT BE TEMPTED TO EXCEED THE STATED DOSE**. A large dose of a painkiller will not be any more effective than the normal dose, and may cause significant damage to your body that is already under stress due to the event.