



Authoritative facts about the skin from the [New Zealand Dermatological Society Incorporated](#).

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Cracked heels

Cracked heels or heel fissures are a common foot problem experienced by many people. In most cases the problem is merely a nuisance and unattractive to look at, however when the cracks or fissures become deep, standing, walking or any pressure placed on the heel can be painful.

Cracked heels



Who gets cracked heels and why?

Anyone can get cracked heels but some people are more prone to the condition than others. For example:

- [Dry skin](#) for whatever reason
- [Atopic dermatitis](#)
- [Juvenile plantar dermatosis](#)
- [Psoriasis](#), especially [palmoplantar psoriasis](#)
- [Palmoplantar keratoderma](#)
- Systemic conditions that dry the skin, including [diabetes](#) and [hypothyroidism](#)
- Dry thickened skin ([corns and calluses](#)) around the rim of the heel is the very first step towards cracked heels. Increased pressure on the fat pad under the heel causes it to expand sideways, leading to splitting or cracking of the callous. Some factors that contribute towards the callus cracking or splitting include:
 - Excessive weight or obesity
 - Prolonged standing, especially on hard floors
 - Open-back shoes and sandals, as they provide no support to hold the fat pad under the foot

What are the signs of symptoms of cracked heels?

The first sign of getting cracked heels is the development of dry, hard, thickened skin around the rim of the heel. This is called a callus and may be yellow or dark brown discoloured area of skin. Initially small cracks over the callus are visible. If left untreated and as more pressure is placed on the heel, these cracks become deeper and eventually walking and standing will be painful. The cracks may be so deep that they begin to bleed.

In severe cases cracked heels can become infected, and lead to [cellulitis](#). This must be treated with elevation of the area, debridement of dead tissue, and [antibiotics](#).

Cracked heels are of particular concern for diabetic patients, who may suffer neuropathic damage (loss of feeling, particularly of the feet), as the fissures may lead to [diabetic foot ulcers](#).

Complications of a cracked heel



Cellulitis



Diabetic ulcer

What is the treatment for cracked heels?

The best form of treatment for cracked heels is to prevent them from occurring in the first place. This can be achieved by simply rubbing the heels with a [moisturising cream](#) on a regular basis to keep the skin supple and hydrated. Special heel balms are available that contain descaling (keratolytic) or water-retaining (humectant) agents, such as:

- [Urea](#)
- [Salicylic acid](#)
- [Alpha-hydroxy acids](#)
- Saccharide isomerate

Feet should be inspected daily and on the first sign of any cracking, a moisturising routine 2–3 times a day may be all that is needed to heal the heel. A pumice stone can be rubbed gently against the callus to take away some of the thick hard skin before applying moisturiser.

The fissures may be treated with a liquid, gel or spray bandage to reduce pain, protect and allow more rapid healing.

For severely cracked heels or if no improvement is seen after a week of self-treatment a visit to a podiatrist may be required. Treatments may involve the following.

- Debridement – cutting away hard thick skin (this should not be attempted at home using scissors or razor blade as there is a risk of removing too much skin and infection occurring)
- Strapping – bandage/dressings around the heel to reduce skin movement
- Prescription for stronger softening or debriding agents, e.g. urea or salicylic acid creams
- Insoles, heel pad or heel cups to redistribute the weight of the heel and provide better support (prevent the fat pad from expanding sideways)
- Special tissue glue to hold the edges of the cracked skin together so it can heal.

Related information

References:

On DermNet NZ:

- [Dry skin](#)
- [Emollients and moisturisers](#)
- [Palmoplantar psoriasis](#)
- [Palmoplantar keratoderma](#)

- [Juvenile plantar dermatosis](#)
- [Conditions affecting the feet](#)

Other websites:

Books about skin diseases:

See the [DermNet NZ bookstore](#)

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DermNet does not provide an on-line consultation service.

If you have any concerns with your skin or its treatment, see a [dermatologist](#) for advice.

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