



Dealing with Blisters

The longstanding members at your club will each have their favourite blister prevention tips and remedies. To some of them having rough scarred hands is a badge of honour and they think you should just deal with it and that it is a rite of passage. However, blisters can be extremely painful, can cause you to have bad technique when rowing with them, can get infected very easily. Andy Holmes (an Olympic rower) died in 2010 when he contracted leptospirosis through blisters he had on his hands.

Blisters can happen in during outings on the water, in the gym, and on the ergo.

Avoid getting blisters if possible. Keep your hands clean, wash with soap and water, use hand cream to keep your skin supple and to help prevent chapping and dry skin. Keeping yourself generally healthy and well hydrated will also help.

Blisters on your hands happen due to the constant friction between your hand and the oar handle – either from high mileage or from gripping too hard. Gripping too hard is a technical fault – learning to loosen your grip will help you to improve your rowing/sculling in many ways and will help to prevent other injuries such as tenosynovitis (think of a hook not a grip). Some people wear gloves – this is a personal choice, and can be essential if you work in healthcare and allied professions where having blistered and calloused skin is generally frowned upon. Gloves are also useful if your hands get very sweaty. There are specialist rowing gloves available or you can use gym/lifting gloves. Keep your gloves clean. Try to keep your hands dry. Try to keep your kit dry. If you have very sweaty hands consider wearing gloves and using a towel in the gym to keep your hands clean. Keep your gym gloves clean too.

If your blister bursts during an outing please ensure that you scrub the oar handles well at the end of the outing to remove the blood and fluid and help prevent bacterial infection for others using the equipment.

Blisters can also occur on your buttocks – again due to friction between your buttocks and the seat, especially when wet. Use a seat pad or a folded towel if you are prone to these. Double layers on rowing shorts helps to prevent these as well.

How to treat a blister: the basic rule is to keep blisters dry and covered, particularly during the day, most of the time they look after themselves. If you decide you need to burst your blister (if this has not already happened during the outing) this is how to do it.

- 1) wash your hands and the blister with warm water and soap.
- 2) wipe the blister and the area around it with an antiseptic liquid or cream. NOT surgical spirit or Methylated Spirit. Cover with a clean dry dressing, gauze or bandage
- 3) sterilize a clean, sharp needle by wiping it with the antiseptic
- 4) gently puncture the blister around the edge in a few spots.
- 5) gently press down on the blister and let the fluid drain out

- 6) do NOT remove the skin over the blister
- 7) apply antiseptic ointment over the area and cover with gauze or a bandage.
- 8) keep it dry.
- 9) after a few days cut away the dead skin using sterilised (dipped in antiseptic liquid) scissors and tweezers
- 10) reapply antiseptic ointment.
- 11) protect the area with a bandage or gauze when you return to rowing
- 12) if you notice redness, pus, warm or inflamed skin, or the pain increases seek medical help immediately as all of these could be signs of serious infection.

Rowing Hands.... Care tips from LtCdr Pete Reed OBE

- 1) Take care of your hands just like you would train, stretch & recover. Hand care is underrated and a potential pitfall.
- 2) Everyone gets blisters, the aim is to have them heal quickly and not be deep, painful or get infected and then to maintain healthy calluses.
- 3) Keep hands clean! Wash & dry thoroughly. Use an antiseptic wound wash.
- 4) Cut & file nails so they don't snag, rip and get infected.
- 5) Buy cuticle clippers from any big chemist in the nail section. They are perfect for trimming the rough/loose edges of old blisters so they don't rip into healthy skin. MUCH better than teeth.
- 6) Do not chew dead skin off!
- 7) Use alcohol gel on blisters. It will sting.
- 8) Rowers, keep your handles clean! Scrub with a sponge and fairy liquid will do.
- 9) Savlon/Sudocrem cream at night.
- 10) CAREFUL: a very sharp knife used like a razor is perfect for cutting down mountainous calluses.
- 11) Sandpaper is perfect for sanding down calluses. You don't want big mountains - just a thin, tough layer.
- 12) If your hands are raw and a total bloody mess, do not row. You're not being brave, you're being foolish. You won't be able to row properly affecting your session, training, crew, risk of inflaming tendons from adjusted grip and risk of infection. Go on the bike and give them a chance to heal.
- 13) CAREFUL: Normal superglue can be used to seal those horrible cracks that form and open at the edge of hardening blister cavities. Put it covering the crack like a plaster. KEEP HANDS OPEN UNTIL FULLY DRY. Skin will heal beneath it and it will come off like skin naturally.
- 14) Do use your preferred moisturiser, but not before training. Your hands will be slippery. Use it in the evening & before bed. You want your calluses to be tough AND supple.

Further care and treatment for blisters

Raf Wyatt authored an informative piece for Rowperfect UK in 2011 called *6 Ways to Treat Rowing Blisters*.

Wyatt lays out methods for dealing with six types of blister:

- 1) Blister raised and filled with fluid:
 drain it and protect it
- 2) Top layer of skin torn / rubbed away:
 wash with hot soapy water
- 3) Red / inflamed skin around blister:
 seek medical advice if “angry” look persists
- 4) Cracked raw skin:
 apply antiseptic cream / Vaseline and protect it
- 5) New skin formed but old skin cracked around edges:
 trim ragged edges
- 6) Hard / raised callus after blister heals:
 soak in water and smooth skin with pumice

<https://www.rowperfect.co.uk/6-ways-treat-rowing-blisters/>