

# Folliculitis

## CATEGORY:

## Follicular disorder / Infections

### LOOKS LIKE:

Small red/purple/brown spots/bumps around hair follicles; often contain pus

### FEELS LIKE:

Bumpy; sore; sometimes itchy

### OUTLOOK:

Mild cases often go away with simple at-home measures; more severe cases may need treatment

### LOCATION:

Any hair-growing skin surface; does not occur on palms of hands or soles of feet



## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



Pus spots in bacterial folliculitis



Folliculitis on the scalp



Severe bacterial folliculitis on the neck



Bacterial folliculitis due to *Pseudomonas* bacteria in a spa pool



Beard area folliculitis



Folliculitis on the chest due to a yeast infection

## What is it?

Folliculitis is a **common**, treatable skin condition that occurs when **hair follicles** become inflamed and form painful spots or bumps. Hair follicles are the tiny tube-like structures on your skin within which hair grows.

There are a number of different causes of folliculitis. This affects the type of rash seen, how long it lasts, if it's contagious, and what kind of treatment is needed.

It is more common in people who shave frequently.

Folliculitis is not cancerous.

# Folliculitis

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## CAUSES —

Folliculitis has a number of causes, including:

- **Infections** — by bacteria (most commonly *Staphylococcus aureus*; sometimes *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* from hot tubs); fungi and yeasts; viruses; or parasites
- **Ingrown hairs** or blocked hair follicles
- **Irritation** eg, from shaving or other hair removal methods; friction/chafing; sweat; or a reaction to skin products or dressings
- **Inflammatory skin conditions** eg, acne, lichen planus, lupus — some have a genetic component and can run in families
- **Immunosuppression** (a weakened immune system) eg, due to diabetes or HIV
- **Medications** eg, steroids, lithium, long-term antibiotics, and some cancer treatments.

## SYMPTOMS —

Depending on the cause and type, folliculitis can look and feel different. It affects one or more hair follicles, causing **small bump/s** that can be:

- **Itchy or sore**
- Red, purple, or darker than the surrounding skin (depending on skin colour)
- Filled with **pus** (yellow-white fluid).

Folliculitis can occur on any skin surface where hair grows, including the buttocks. Areas targeted for hair removal (eg, legs, armpits, pubic area) are commonly affected. In men, it is often seen in the beard and neck area. It doesn't affect the palms and soles.

## COMPLICATIONS —

- **Secondary infection** — even if not initially infected, folliculitis can become infected over time as it is easier for bugs like bacteria or fungi to get into irritated, inflamed hair follicles.
- **Severe infection** — eg, boils, abscesses, or cellulitis may develop and can sometimes spread elsewhere on the body. Seek urgent medical attention if you have a rash and a fever or are feeling unwell.
- **Skin discolouration** — folliculitis may leave behind pale (hypopigmented) or dark (hyperpigmented) spots that usually return to normal with time.
- **Scarring and permanent hair loss** — this may happen in severe cases, especially if left untreated.

## DIAGNOSIS —

A healthcare professional can usually diagnose folliculitis by asking a few questions and **examining your skin**. If they suspect an infection, they may check your temperature and take a **skin scraping** (where skin cells are brushed off with a blunt blade) or **swab** of the affected area.

In some cases, other tests such as blood tests or a biopsy (skin sample) are recommended to confirm the diagnosis or rule out other causes.

## TREATMENT AND PREVENTION —

**In mild cases, folliculitis often does not need treatment** and goes away on its own in a few days.

General prevention and **skincare measures**:

- Use oil-free (non-comedogenic) skin products and avoid irritating products
- Wear loose, breathable clothing eg, cotton
- Shave in the direction of hair growth
- Stop hair removal until symptoms settle
- Ensure adequate sanitisation of spas/pools.

**Sometimes specific treatments are needed**, depending on the cause and severity of the folliculitis — for example:

- Antiseptic cleansers and creams
- Antibiotic, antifungal, antiparasitic, or antiviral creams/ointments/lotions or pills
- Permanent hair removal eg, laser therapy
- Ultraviolet light therapy (phototherapy).

## OUTCOME —

Mild folliculitis typically clears up on its own within a few days. More severe cases can be treated medically and early treatment usually leads to recovery without scarring.



<https://dermnetnz.org/topics/folliculitis>