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Cracked Heels Causing You Pain? We Can Help

Steal these easy solutions for the skin on your feet, which is critical for healthy, pain-free running.

BY [LAUREN BEDOSKY](#) PUBLISHED: JUN 13, 2024



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While it's not the sexiest topic, for runners, dry, cracked heels can be more than a nuisance—they can dampen your weekly mileage. Small fissures in the skin can deepen and become painful cracks, making you cringe with each step. Bacteria can then enter those cracks, leading to a skin infection known as cellulitis.

Of course, it's unlikely things will get that serious, but considering how much you rely on your feet to reach your run goals, you want them to be as healthy and happy

as possible.

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If you're bothered by cracked heels, it's essential to figure out why and how to fix them. "The feet take the greatest beating for runners, so doing things to take care of the feet has a lot of value," [Sonya Kenkare, M.D.](#), a board-certified dermatologist with Illinois Dermatology Institute tells *Runner's World*. Soothing your cracked heels and taking steps to prevent future issues can help you run pain-free.

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Common Causes of Cracked Heels

While the heels of your feet seem cushy and soft, in fact, they are sensitive and particularly vulnerable to dryness.

“The most common cause of cracked heels is dry skin,” [Paul Langer, D.P.M.](#), a board-certified podiatrist with Twin Cities Orthopedics who specializes in sports medicine, tells *Runner’s World*. The soles of the feet can be more vulnerable to dryness because they don’t have sebaceous glands. These tiny skin glands produce sebum, an oily substance that helps our skin retain moisture, Langer explains.

The lack of sebaceous glands combined with the repetitive demands of [running](#) is why runners are more susceptible to cracked heels.

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“The skin of the heel is unique in that the fat pad that it covers deforms with each step, so the skin needs to be very elastic to adapt to the movement of each step,” Langer says. If the skin is dry, it won’t be able to expand with the fat pad, causing tiny fissures to form. The longer the skin stays dry, the deeper the fissures will get—they may even start bleeding.

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Poorly-fitting [running shoes](#) can also contribute to cracked heels. “Wearing shoes that don’t fit properly or lack adequate [cushioning](#) can make things worse by increasing pressure on the heels,” Marmon adds.

Many runners are more prone to cracked heels at specific times of the year. The colder months can cause cracked heels, thanks to indoor heating and dry air. However, cracked heels are more common in [summer](#), when people wear sandals or go barefoot, [Shoshana Marmon, M.D., Ph.D.](#), a board-certified dermatologist and clinical assistant professor with New York Medical College tells *Runner’s World*. “Our skin loses moisture without [socks](#) or shoes covering the skin,” she explains.

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When Cracked Heels Are a Sign of Another Condition

Runners should be aware that, sometimes, cracked heels can be a symptom of another health condition, such as eczema or psoriasis, which are inflammatory skin diseases.

“Some people may have mild versions of these conditions and not even be aware that they have them, and the repeated friction [from running] may make their skin very uncomfortable,” Kenkare says. Essentially, running unmasks the condition.

Psoriasis and eczema often cause scales, flakes, dryness, and discolored skin all over the body, including the feet, according to the [National Eczema Foundation](#). Dyshidrotic eczema, specifically, only causes flare-ups on the hands and feet. With dyshidrotic eczema, symptoms begin with a rash of painful [blisters](#). As the blisters heal, according to the [National Eczema Association](#) the skin dries, creating painful cracks..

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Other conditions that can make you more vulnerable to dry, cracked heels include [diabetes](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [hypothyroidism](#), and athlete's foot, Langer says.

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How Runners Can Prevent and Treat Cracked Heels

Runners should [moisturize](#) their feet daily—even multiple times a day—to prevent and resolve cracked heels.

Kenkare suggests generously applying petroleum jelly to the soles of your feet before a run, after showering, and before bed to help restore moisture. At night, cover your feet with [socks](#) or a silicone or neoprene heel wrap to help the petroleum jelly sink in.

[Annie Chiu, M.D.](#), a board-certified dermatologist and founder of The Derm Institute in Redondo Beach, California, recommends [Drunk Elephant Wonderwild Miracle Butter](#). “This is a great product for feet and any dry areas like elbows, knees, and hands,” she tells *Runner’s World*. It contains [antioxidants](#) and fatty acids, like shea butter and jojoba seed oil.

If you have thick [calluses](#) on your heels, use creams and lotions that contain urea instead of petroleum jelly. Urea is a topical medication that can improve skin hydration and elasticity and help soften thick, rough skin, Langer says. “But when urea is applied to open or cracked skin, it burns terribly,” Kenkare warns.

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If you already have cracked skin on your heels, the [American Academy of Dermatology Association](#) suggests applying a liquid bandage over the cracks to prevent [bacteria](#) from entering the skin.

Once the cracks heal, Kenkare recommends using a gentle pumice stone to get rid of excess skin. “When people have cracks in their heels and they let it go for a long time, the skin gets thicker and thicker,” Kenkare says. As the skin thickens, it becomes harder for [creams](#) and lotions to penetrate and restore moisture.

After spending the night with the feet moisturized and covered, gently exfoliate your heels with a pumice stone the following morning. “Often, this method only needs to be done one or two nights in a row to get dry, thick skin under control,” Langer notes.

To prevent your heels from cracking in the future, it’s essential to wear **supportive running shoes** with plenty of cushioning, Chiu says. If you suspect that your running shoes are putting too much pressure on your heels, visit a specialty running store to get a professional assessment.

If you’ve tried these conservative treatments for a month without improvement, see a dermatologist, Kenkare says. You may have an underlying medical condition that’s causing your heels to become dry and cracked. Or, you may need help from prescription topical treatments to fix your cracked heels.

Seek help right away if your heel fissures are painful or bleeding, as this suggests the deeper layer of skin (the dermis) is injured and at risk of infection, Langer says.

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