

BUSTER-ING CONCERNS

A blister might sound like a minor injury – but for a tennis player it can be a major issue. **ROB BRANDHAM** explains

A first Grand Slam semifinal is a big milestone in a tennis player's career, but earlier this year blisters turned that moment into a nightmare for Korean Hyeon Chung.

Instead of being able to compete with defending champion Roger Federer in the Australian Open semifinals, the disappointed 21-year-old had to retire in the second set.

"I (am) really hurt. I can't walk no more," Chung lamented.

Marin Cilic experienced a similar situation in the Wimbledon 2017 final, when a foot blister reduced him to tears on court.

"I really wanted to give my best, you know, to try as much as I could," Cilic said. "It was definitely one of the unfortunate days for me to happen."

Blisters are common for tennis players, with their hands and feet most likely affected. They form when the pressure of a solid surface, such as shoes or a racquet grip, rubs against skin. The compressive force of this leads to a separation of skin cell layers. If fluid or moisture gets between these separating layers, a blister forms. Sweaty skin is more prone to blisters as this softens the hard outer layer of the skin.

RECOVERY

It usually takes 24 hours before a blister starts to heal and about four to five days to resolve. When a blister forms, rest is important. If not possible, such as in the middle of a tournament, draining the fluid inside a painful blister can relieve pressure. Puncturing the skin can risk infection, so it is important to use a sterilised needle. Pierce the blister on two sides and then progressively drain fluid using light pressure. When finished, dry and clean the area using an antiseptic such as Iodine or Betadine. Using padding and tape on this area (as per photo examples below) will help it to heal while you continue to play and train.

PREVENTION

Blisters are not always avoidable, but preparation can help prevent them.

- Stiffer, new shoes must be worn in and need to fit properly. Ensure there is

1-1.5 centimetres of space from the longest toe to the end of the shoe and the shoe width is snug, not tight.

- Change sweaty socks regularly and wear a thinner synthetic inner sock under the main thicker sock to reduce friction.
- If there is a particular area of your foot that has the potential to blister, use taping and padding as protection. Padding aims to spread the load away from the impacted area and taping can alleviate the friction on the skin. Spreading Vaseline over areas of friction and between toes can also lessen the impact.

FROM BLISTER TO CALLUS

Skin can adapt to ongoing friction by laying down extra layers to form a buffer to this stress. This forms a callus. While this can be helpful, if left unchecked it can quickly also become an issue. As the extra layers of skin build up and thicken the callus, there

is potential for this to rub and put pressure on the fresh softer skin underneath. Intermittently reducing thickness using a callus shaver is the best way to avoid this. However if too much skin is removed, the exposed fresh skin might not cope with stress. It is best to shave a little bit at a time, stopping when the skin has a shiny appearance.

TREAT THEM WITH RESPECT

Hidden from view and less dramatic than some other tennis injuries, it's easy to underestimate the serious impact of blisters. But while they can end matches and tournaments – and in the case of Chung, halt momentum when he withdrew from his next event following the Australian Open – blisters are unlikely to be a long-term concern. With prevention and the right recovery process, you'll soon return to court in full health. **ATM**

Rob Brandham, APA Sports Physio, BPhysio, MPhysio (Sports), has experience managing musculoskeletal injuries in AFL, soccer and rugby. He has worked at the Australian Open and Tennis Australia. Rob is based at the St Kilda Road Sports and Physiotherapy Centre.



PROTECTION:
An example of padding and taping players can use to protect blistered feet.

