

# Athlete's Foot and Fungal Nails

Podiatry Department

Patient Information Leaflet

## What is Athlete's Foot?

Athlete's foot is a common skin infection caused by a fungus. The medical name for athlete's foot is "tinea pedis". Athlete's foot can lead to intense itching, cracked, blistered or peeling areas of skin, redness and scaling.

Fungal germs (fungi) often occur in small numbers on human skin where they usually do no harm. However, if conditions are right, they can invade the skin, multiply and cause infection. The conditions fungi like best are warm, moist and airless areas of skin, such as between the toes.

The infection may spread gradually along the toes if the athlete's foot is left untreated. In some cases, it spreads to the soles or the nails and can be transferred to other parts of the body.

### **Is it serious?**

If left untreated, the fungus can spread to the toenails, causing thickening and yellowing of the nail, which is much harder to treat.

Fungal infections are highly contagious and can spread to anywhere on your skin, including your scalp, hands and even your groin. This is especially likely if you use the same towel for your feet as for the rest of your body.

Fungi do not usually spread deeper than the skin. However, other germs may enter through the cracked skin of untreated athlete's foot. This can occasionally cause more serious infections.

### **How is it treated?**

It is always best to treat this condition as soon as symptoms are first noticed.

Treatments depend on what type of athlete's foot you have. Over-the-counter remedies are always a good starting point so it would be advisable to speak to your local pharmacist.

For athlete's foot where the skin conditions are dry, such as your heel, you need to restore moisture by rubbing in an antifungal cream or spray, sometimes combined with a steroid cream (all from your pharmacist).

You must remember to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards, or use disposable gloves, so you don't get the fungus on your hands.

For athlete's foot where the skin conditions are moist a different treatment is required.

Wash your feet in water as cold as you can bear (hot water only makes your feet fungus-friendly) then dry them thoroughly, preferably with a separate towel or even kitchen roll. It is important to dab your feet dry rather than rub them, as rubbing tends to remove any healing skin. Although the skin may appear flaky and dry, never use moisturiser between your toes, and avoid powders as they can cake up and irritate skin.

A spirit-based preparation such as surgical spirit can help - it's cooling, soothing and antiseptic. This may sting a little but will help the moisture evaporate and allow the skin to heal. Only use on unbroken skin.

In severe cases, an anti-fungal tablet may be prescribed. However, tablets are not suitable for everyone, for example pregnant women, so always check with your pharmacist and follow the instructions carefully.

You should also avoid using anti-fungal powders between the toes, although they're good for dusting inside shoes and trainers to prevent reinfection. It is important to observe good foot hygiene, changing socks, stockings, or tights every day and if possible alternating footwear (swapping between two or more pairs of shoes) to allow them to dry out thoroughly between wears.

The mistake most people make is to stop their hygiene regime, shoe rotation and/or medication once their symptoms have gone. Although symptoms may disappear after several days or weeks of treatment, the fungus can lie dormant and could eventually reappear in the right environment. Some products require continued treatment for many weeks – always follow the instructions fully. Also, be alert to symptoms so that you can deal with any problems straight away.

### **What is fungal toenail?**

Fungal infection of nails is common, particularly in toenails in the elderly. The infection causes thickened and discoloured nails which sometimes become painful.

Often the infection is just in one nail, but several may be affected. It is usually painless.

The most common symptoms are:

- Thickened nail.
- Discoloured nail (often a yellowish colour).

Commonly, this is all that occurs, and fungal nail infections often cause no other symptoms.

The main reason people see their doctor is because the appearance is unsightly.

Sometimes the infection becomes worse and additional symptoms occur. These include:

- The nail becoming soft and crumbling.
- White or yellow patches appearing where the nail has come away from the skin.
- The skin next to the nail becoming inflamed or scaly.

- Sometimes the whole nail comes away.
- If left untreated, the infection may eventually destroy the nail and the nail bed may become painful.
- Walking may become uncomfortable if a toenail is affected.

If the infection is mild or causing no symptoms then sometimes no treatment is recommended. For example, a single small toenail may be infected and remain painless and of little concern

Over-the-counter remedies such as anti-fungal nail lacquer can be used and advice can be sought from your local Pharmacist. These can take up to a year or more to work as it takes this long for a nail to fully grow out.

Prescribed oral medications from your GP can be used for fungal nails. These usually take between three and six months to get rid of the infection but can take longer. Oral medication can have side-effects so if you have other medical conditions or are on other medication, it may recommend that you don't take it.

It is important to note that even with successful treatment of a fungal nail infection that the affected nail may remain thickened and slightly discoloured due to the damage the infection has caused to the nail.

## Preventing fungal nail infections

Studies suggest that in about 1 in 4 cases where the fungal nail infection has been cleared from the nail, the infection returns within three years. One way to help prevent a further bout of nail infection is to treat athlete's foot as early as possible to stop the infection spreading to the nail.

Also:

- Try to avoid injury to nails, which may increase the risk of developing a nail infection.
- Wear footwear such as flip-flops in public places, such as communal bathing/shower places, locker rooms, etc.
- Avoid towel sharing.
- Consider replacing old footwear, as this could be contaminated with fungal spores.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

**Podiatry Department**

Call **01384 321427** (9am-5pm, Monday to Friday) or e-mail [dgft.podiatry.appointments@nhs.net](mailto:dgft.podiatry.appointments@nhs.net)

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