

# Fungal Nail Infection

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from getting Fungal Nail Infections. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

## Useful facts

- **What is Fungal Nail Infection?** Fungal infections of the nail are usually caused by the same fungus as that which causes athlete's foot (a common fungal infection of the skin of the feet, especially between the toes).
- **Are they hereditary?** No, but several family members may have them at the same time because they can transfer them to each other.
- **What's causing it?** Fungi spreading from athlete's foot cause most fungal nail infections. Less often a nail infection is due to other types of fungi, usually yeasts and moulds. Fungal nails are very common in people with nails that are already damaged, in the elderly, in those with impaired immune systems and people with diabetes.

## What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **Symptoms** At the start, there are usually no symptoms. The fungal infection usually starts at the free edge then spreads down the side of the nail towards the base of the cuticle. Eventually the whole nail may become involved and become thickened and crumbly. The fungus tends to harbour in the nail bed. Later, the nails may become so thick that they hurt when they press on the inside of the shoe and are difficult to cut.
- ✓ **Impact on your life** The look of an infected nail, particularly a fingernail, may cause embarrassment. You can sometimes get fungal nail infections on the nearby skin.
- ✓ **Duration** Fungal nail infections do not usually clear up by themselves but many do not need treatment. If they do not bother you, you can leave them alone. People with diabetes or immune suppression should try to treat them to avoid foot problems. If you are treating a fungal nail infection, it can take 4 to 12 months before you see a response and 18 months for it to grow out completely.

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## What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Nail care** Keep your nails short, dry and clean. Stick to one nail clipper for infected nails and another for the normal ones. Regular removal of abnormal nail material can help topical treatments to work better.
- ✓ **Feet and Socks** Keep your feet dry, wear cotton socks changed once or twice daily and use “breathable” shoes. Normal laundry in hot water clears most affected socks, but it can be made more effective if an antifungal spray is used before laundry. Other clothes are not affected by washing with the socks with or without antifungal spray.
- ✓ **Cross contamination** Do not share your personal towels and socks with other people to reduce the transfer of infection. In swimming pools, special slippers should be worn for the same reasons.
- ✓ **Over the counter creams** Don’t just treat your nails; use an antifungal cream to treat the skin that has athlete’s foot as well.
- ✓ **Nail solutions / paints** eg Amorolfine nail lacquer. These are applied to the nail and are very safe to use.
- ✓ **Teatree oil** The advantage of this is that unlike nail paints it can be dripped down the free end of the nail and rubbed into the nail base/bed as well as using on the nail itself. Do not use if you experience irritation.

## When should I seek medical help?

Seek advice from your pharmacist or GP if any of the following warning symptoms are present:

- **Existing conditions** You have diabetes or immune suppression.
- **Treatments** Topical treatments have not worked and you want to discuss oral medications (oral medications are more likely to cause side effects such as severe allergic reactions, alteration to sense of smell and liver damage).

## Where can I find out more?

Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms and advise on suitable treatments.



111 is the NHS non-emergency number. It’s fast, easy and free. Call 111 and speak to a highly trained adviser, supported by healthcare professionals. They will ask you a series of questions to assess your symptoms and immediately direct you to the best medical care for you.

NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.