

Self-care information on...

Athlete's Foot and Fungal Nail Infections



What is athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot is a common fungal infection of the skin on the feet. 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. Your feet provide a warm, dark and humid environment. These are ideal conditions for fungus to grow.

Athlete's foot spreads easily and can be passed from person to person through contaminated towels, clothing or surfaces. Scratching the infected skin and then touching other parts of your body can also spread the infection.

Most cases of athlete's foot are mild and can be treated at home.

What are the symptoms of athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot causes an itchy rash to develop in the spaces between your toes. As well as being itchy, your skin may also be red, scaly, flaky or dry. The rash may spread gradually along the toes if left untreated. In some cases it spreads to the soles. Occasionally, the infection causes a scaling rash on the entire sole and side of the foot.

You may also have other symptoms such as:

- Cracked skin
- Blisters (which may be oozing or crusting)
- Swollen skin
- Burning or stinging skin.

Complications of athlete's foot

If athlete's foot is not treated effectively, the infection can sometimes spread to other parts of your body, such as the toenails, causing a fungal nail infection, or the palms of your hands.

What are the symptoms of a fungal nail infection?

The most common symptom of a fungal nail infection is the nail becoming thickened and discoloured. The nail can turn white, black, yellow or green.

A fungal nail infection is usually painless at first and in most cases fungal nail infections will not cause any further complications.

How to treat and prevent athlete's foot and fungal nail infections

Self-care

- Wash your feet regularly using soap and water and dry them thoroughly, paying particular attention to the areas between your toes.
- Keep your feet cool and dry, wear clean cotton socks and avoid wearing trainers.
- Treat athlete's foot as soon as possible to avoid spreading the infection to your nails.
- Clip your nails to keep them short - use a separate pair of clippers or scissors to cut any infected nails to avoid spreading the infection to other nails.
- Wear well-fitting shoes, without high heels or narrow toes.
- Avoid sharing towels and ensure that your towels are washed regularly.
- If you have had a fungal foot infection in the past, consider replacing your old footwear, as this could be a source of re-infection.

Medicines available to treat athlete's foot

Antifungal medication works by killing the fungi that are causing your infection. Topical antifungal medicines, which are applied directly to the area being treated, are widely available from pharmacies without a prescription. Athlete's foot should be treated with antifungal medication to prevent spreading the infection to your nails. Your pharmacist can recommend the most suitable treatment for you.

- Antifungal creams and sprays
 - * Available to buy from pharmacies.
 - * Examples include clotrimazole 1% cream.

Medicines available to treat fungal nail infections

Mild fungal nail infections, which are not causing any problems, may not need treatment. Your pharmacist can recommend the most suitable treatment for you.

- Antifungal paints
 - * Can be bought from pharmacies.
 - * Used to treat nail infections only. Not suitable for treating athlete's foot.
 - * Take a long time to clear the nail infection and require perseverance.
 - * Have limited success.
 - * GPs are not recommended to prescribe nail paints due to a lack of evidence to show they work well.
- Antifungal tablets
 - * Reserved for severe nail infections.
 - * Only available on prescription.
 - * You may need to take the tablet for several months to ensure the infection has completely gone.
 - * Although effective, oral treatments are more likely to cause side effects than nail paints.

Key points when using topical antifungal medication

- Always wash your hands before and after applying the treatment.
- Make sure that the area is dry before applying the treatment.
- Apply antifungal creams and sprays directly to the rash and surrounding area (4–6cm) of normal, healthy skin. This helps prevent re-infection.
- Continue to apply the antifungal treatment for as long as recommended in the instructions that come with the medicine.
- Although your rash may disappear quickly, it does not necessarily mean that the infection has been completely treated. You may need to use medication for one to two weeks after your symptoms have disappeared to ensure the infection has been successfully treated.
- Always read the information leaflet that comes with your medicine.

If you have diabetes or poor circulation and get any type of foot or nail infection you should contact your GP practice.

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK www.patient.co.uk

