NHS
Somerset
NHS Foundation Trust

# Chilblains

## What are chilblains?

Chilblains are areas of skin that have been damaged by becoming cold. Normally the blood flow to the skin increases gradually so that cold skin becomes warm again as the body heats up. However in chilblains the blood flow is very slow which results in damage to the skin. Although you can suffer from chilblains at any time of year, they are most common during winter when the weather is cold and damp.

## Where do they appear on the body?

Chilblains are usually found on the feet especially at the tip of your toes. However they can also occur on your hands, ears or nose (the extremities).

## What do they look like?

Chilblains appear as bluish or red patches on the skin. They may be hot, swollen or itchy. Normally they last for two to three weeks but this may be longer in people with poor circulation.

## What should I do if I get them?

- Do not scratch them.
- Use a soothing lotion such as Snowfire, Balmosa, Witch Hazel or Calamine which will ease most of the discomfort.
- If the chilblain has ulcerated, cover it immediately with a sterile dressing such as Melolin or Solvaline. Both of these dressings can be bought at a pharmacy. Check the area daily for signs and symptoms of infection and go to the GP if you have any concerns.
- If you are diabetic or undergoing any medical treatment, ask your practice nurse to look at the ulcer as soon as possible, or the GP will refer you to podiatry.
- If the chilblain has not broken, ask your pharmacist for an over-the-counter chilblain preparation.

## Can I do anything to prevent chilblains?

- In the autumn, people who regularly get chilblains in winter can start applying a chilblain cream (for example Balmosa) to the affected area to try and prevent them. Gently massaging the cream into the area will also help the circulation.
- Keep yourself and your feet as warm as possible. Cover your legs and feet with a loose blanket when you are sitting down and eat warm food such as soup.

- Avoid sitting in draughts and standing around in the cold.
- Try wearing trousers or long thermal underwear. Wear wool or thermal socks or stockings during the day and bed socks at night.
- Thermal insoles in your boots and shoes may help. Wherever possible avoid wearing shoes with low fronts. Try wearing ankle boots to keep your feet warm as heat is lost from the top of your foot.
- Wear a hat and gloves when outside in the cold, as you can lose a lot of heat through your head and extremities.
- Waterproof your shoes with an appropriate product from an outdoor/camping shop.
- Whenever possible help stimulate your circulation with some gentle exercise such as walking.

## Do not

- Warm your feet in front of direct heat.
- Put your feet directly onto a hot water bottle or an electric blanket.
- Wear tight shoes and stockings as this will restrict the circulation in your feet and toes.
- Wear wet shoes.