

Fungal nail infection (Onychomycosis)

Who gets fungal nail infections?

Anyone can get a fungal nail infection but they are most common in people over 55 and in people who share communal showers, such as swimmers or athletes.

How do you get them?

- The nail infection can spread from a fungal skin infection. For example, athlete's foot is caused by a fungal skin infection which may spread to the toenails, fingernails and hands if the skin infection is not treated quickly enough.
- A nail that has recently been damaged is more likely to become infected.
- There is an increased risk of developing a fungal nail infection if the person has other conditions such as diabetes, psoriasis, poor circulation, or general ill health.
- Smoking increases the risk of developing a nail infection.
- In some cases there is no apparent reason. Fungal spores are common and an infection can occur for no known reason.

Symptoms

The infection can affect one or several nails. The nail infection is usually painless at first. The nail may look thickened and discoloured. Commonly these are the only symptoms that occur. Sometimes the infection worsens: white or yellow patches may appear where the nail has come away from the skin under the nail (the nailbed); sometimes the whole nail comes away; the nail can become soft and crumble; pieces of nail may fall off and the skin next to the nail may be inflamed or scaly. If left untreated, the infection may eventually destroy the nail and the nailbed, and then the toe may become painful. Walking can become uncomfortable if a toenail is badly affected.

Treatment options

Medication-free treatment

This form of treatment is an option if the infection is mild or causing minimal symptoms, for example, a single small toenail may become infected and remains painless. Some people prefer not to take medication as, although rare, there is a small chance of serious side-effects from antifungal medication.

Treatment as follows

- File down any thickened nail manually. Use of an electric nail drill is not recommended as this may result in fungal spores being dispersed into the air, which is a health risk. If you have used a foot file on the affected nail do not use it on other toes as it could spread the infection.



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- Wash the file after use in cold running water to prevent fungal spores being dispersed.
- Do not share nail scissors, clippers or files with anyone else.
- Avoid injury and irritants to the nails.
- Wear properly fitted shoes with a deep, wide, rounded, leather upper toe-box and do not wear the same pair of shoes every day.
- Keep the feet cool and dry them as much as possible.

Antifungal nail paint or spray

Nail paint tends to work best if the infection is towards the tip of the nail. This treatment does not work as effectively if the infection is near the skin, or involves the skin around the nail. Nail paint must be used exactly as prescribed in order to achieve the best outcome. Nail paint treatment may need to be used regularly for up to a year.

Medication available from the GP

Antifungal tablets are often successful in resolving a fungal nail infection and will also clear any associated fungal skin infection such as athlete's foot. Medication can be prescribed by your GP but may not be appropriate for some people due to adverse side effects.

Signs of successful nail treatment

The nails may never look totally normal. A healthy nail growing up from the base of the nail is a sign that treatment is successful. After an episode of care, it will take several months for the old infected part of the nail to grow out and be clipped off. The new nail, which is not infected, continues to grow up the nail-bed. It may take up to a year after starting treatment before the infection has grown out.



Nail Surgery

If other treatments have failed an option is to have the nail removed by a minor operation done under local anaesthetic. You will require a referral to podiatry for this to be discussed further and your medical history and any medication you are on need to be taken into account.