



Find out more

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Fungal nail infection

Information for patients

Introduction

Many people develop a fungal nail infection at some point in their life. It's not usually serious, but can be unpleasant and difficult to treat.

Most fungal nail infections occur as a result of the fungi that cause athlete's foot infecting the nails.

The infection develops slowly and causes the nail to become discoloured, thickened and distorted.

The medical name for a fungal nail infection is onychomycosis.

Signs and symptoms

A fungal nail infection may not cause any obvious symptoms at first.

As it progresses, the infection can cause:

- **discolouration of the nail** – it may turn white, black, yellow or green
- **thickening and distortion of the nail** – it may become an unusual shape or texture and be difficult to trim
- **pain or discomfort** – particularly when using or placing pressure on the affected toe or finger
- **brittle or crumbly nails** – pieces may break off and come away completely

Sometimes the skin nearby may also become infected and be itchy and cracked or red and swollen.

Treatment

Treatment isn't always needed for a mild fungal nail infection because it's unlikely to cause any further problems and you may feel it's not worth treating.

Whether you decide to have treatment or not, you should still practice good foot hygiene (see below) to stop the infection getting worse or spreading to others.

Speak to your GP or pharmacist if you're bothered by the appearance of the affected nail, or it's causing problems such as pain and discomfort.

They may recommend: –

- tablets taken once or twice a day for several months
- antifungal nail paints – special paints applied directly to the nail over several months

A procedure to remove the nail completely may be recommended in severe cases. Laser treatment, where a high-energy laser is used to destroy the fungus, is also an option. But this is only available privately and can be expensive.

Prevention

You can reduce your risk of developing a fungal nail infection by:

- keeping your feet clean and dry
- wearing well-fitting shoes made of natural materials and clean cotton socks – these will allow your feet to “breathe”
- not sharing clippers, files or scissors with other people
- not sharing towels and socks with other people, and ensure your towels are washed regularly
- not walking around barefoot in public pools, showers, and locker rooms – special shower shoes are available to protect your feet
- replacing old footwear that could be contaminated with fungi
- treating athlete's foot as soon as possible to avoid the infection spreading to your nails

Nail salon equipment can sometimes be the source of fungal nail infections. If you regularly visit a salon, make sure any equipment used is properly sterilised between uses.