

Fungal infections

Fungal skin infections

Tinea pedis, or athlete's foot, is a common condition that affects the skin on the feet, often between the toes, soles and sides of the foot.

It is caused by fungal spores growing on the skin. These spores thrive in warm, moist environments. Athlete's foot often appears as red, itchy areas on the foot, and these areas can be slightly moist (especially if between the toes).

Treatment

Fungal skin infections are often self-limiting and will settle down with good foot hygiene. Wash and dry your feet well daily, especially between your toes. Surgical spirit applied between the toes can reduce maceration (softening of the skin). To prevent the spread, do not share towels and wash them regularly at 60°C.

Wear cotton socks to absorb any moisture and change them daily (change them more often if you have particularly sweaty feet). Wash socks at 60°C to reduce fungal spores. Wear shoes made of breathable materials, such as leather.

Daily application of topical/anti-fungal creams, powders and sprays treat the fungal infection by suppressing and destroying fungal spores. Always read any patient information leaflets before starting treatment, or speak to your pharmacist. These include medication such as clotrimazole, terbinafine and ketoconazole.

Treatment often requires a long course to prevent re-infection (2–4 weeks). If you are prone to fungal skin infections, especially between the toes, daily application of anti-fungal spray to dry the feet can help to control this.

Spores can also live in footwear, so change your shoes regularly and treat with anti-fungal powder or spray.

Note: Fungal skin infections can often be confused with other skin conditions such as eczema, psoriasis or urticaria. If your skin does not respond to topical treatment, speak to your GP, practice nurse or pharmacist.

Fungal nail infections

Onychomycosis (or fungal toenails) affects about 20% of the population and can be difficult to treat. Initially, it appears as yellow/white lines or spots under the surface of the nail and can gradually progress, causing the whole nail to turn yellow, thickened and crumbly.

It is caused by fungal spores penetrating the nail and destroying the keratin in the nail. Fungal nails often cause no pain or discomfort, other than being unsightly and difficult to trim.

Treatment

Fungal nails can be difficult to treat as nails grow slowly, and fungal spores are deep within the nail.

Topical treatment of paints and lacquers are available over the counter and require filing of the nail before application. These are often long courses of treatment (six months or more), and may need to be applied daily or weekly, as advised by the manufacturer.

Nail softeners such as Emtrix can improve the appearance of nails and make them easier to trim.

Tea tree oil has anti-fungal properties. A diluted solution applied to the nails can help manage fungal infections.

Podiatrists can help to reduce the thickness of nails and this will help with topical treatment penetration, as well as improve the appearance of nails.

Oral medication can be prescribed by your GP or practice nurse. However, these can have side effects, treatment can be lengthy and you will require regular blood tests.

Note: Damage or trauma to nails can cause them to grow thick and distorted. Thicker nails often have a yellow/dark colour, however they do not crumble or split when trimmed. Eczema, psoriasis and systemic illnesses can also cause nails to change appearance. In this instance, nails will often not get any better, but can be removed if they become troublesome.

Further information

For further information, visit www.rcpod.org.uk/common-foot-problems/athletes-foot



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