

# Patient information

## Fungal nail infection

### What is a fungal nail infection?

Fungal nail infections are common, they are not serious, but can take a long time to treat. They usually affect toe nails, but you can get them on your finger nails too.

Fungal nail infections sometimes start at the edge of the nail and can then spread to the middle of the nails, making the nail discoloured and sometimes thicker in parts. The nail becomes brittle, and pieces can break off. Sometimes the whole nail lifts off. This can cause pain and swelling in the skin and nail.



### What can cause fungal nail infections?

The skin has a natural protection with organisms such as fungus and bacteria living on it in tiny amounts. Given the right conditions, such as trauma to the nail plate; continually having wet damp sweaty feet; having untreated athlete's foot can cause fungal nail infections to develop.

### Is it serious?

If left untreated, the fungus can spread to all of the toe nails, causing them all to become thickened and yellow. Fungal infections are highly contagious and can spread to anywhere on your skin, including your scalp, hands and even your groin. This is especially likely if you use the same towel for your feet as for the rest of your body.

### What are the treatments?

Fungal nail infections are unlikely to get better on its own, but you can buy a number of over-the-counter treatments from the chemist such as anti-fungal nail lacquer and paints. These can take up to a year or more to work as it takes this long for a nail to fully grow out.

Prescribed oral medications from your GP can be used for fungal nails. These usually takes between three and six months to get rid of the infection but can take longer. But before they give you a tablet, they should take a sample of your nail and have it tested, to find out what type of infection you have.

The tablets can have side effects, including:

- headaches
- itching
- loss of taste
- feeling sick and diarrhoea

You cannot take antifungal tablets if you're pregnant or have certain conditions. They can damage your liver.

Badly infected nails sometimes need to be removed. It's a small procedure done while the area is numbed (under local anaesthetic).

Laser treatment is another method of treatment available. You'll have to pay for it as it's not covered by the NHS and this can be expensive. There's little evidence to show it's a long-term cure as most studies only follow patients for 3 months.

## How can I prevent it?

The most important tip for preventing fungal nail infections is to treat athletes' foot as soon as you notice this to prevent this spreading to the nails.

Ensure your feet are completely dry after washing them and before you put your shoes and socks on. When drying them, ensure you pay particular attention to in between your toes, it is better to dab them rather than rub them.

There are many other things you can do to make your feet less hospitable to fungal infections.

- Use a separate towel for your feet and wash it regularly. Do not share this towel with other people.
- Wear clean socks every day, cotton socks are the best.
- Change your footwear on a regular basis. There's no point treating your feet if you constantly re-infect them by putting them into damp, fungally infected shoes. It takes 24-48 hours for shoes to dry out properly, so alternate your shoes daily.
- If you really have to wear the same pair day after day (say, if you're on holiday), dry them out by using a hairdryer on a cold setting; this will get rid of the perspiration quickly without creating more heat. To help shoes dry out more quickly, take any insoles out, loosen any laces and open your shoes out fully so that air can circulate. When buying, choose trainers with ventilation holes.
- If your shoes are so tight that they squeeze your toes together, this allows moisture to gather between your toes and encourages fungus. Instead, let air circulate between the toes by choosing footwear with a wider, deeper toe box and choose shoes made from natural materials.
- Do not walk around bare foot. Wear flip-flops in the bathroom and in public showers. This will ensure that you don't leave any shed skin for others to pick up, and it will also stop you picking up other species of fungus.
- Finally, never wear anyone else's socks or footwear.

## For more information

If you require any assistance, then please contact Podiatry services on 0300 1314536

Or email

[Esh-tr.podiatryenquiries@nhs.net](mailto:Esh-tr.podiatryenquiries@nhs.net)

## Sources of information.

East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust <https://www.esht.nhs.uk/service/podiatry/>

The Health and Care Professions Council [www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org)

The Royal College of Podiatry [www.cop.uk](http://www.cop.uk)

NHS choices [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

## Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

## Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the Patient Experience Team – Tel: 0300 131 4731 (direct dial) or by email at: [esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net](mailto:esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net)

## Hand hygiene

The Trust is committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

## Other formats

**If you require any of the Trust leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department.**

**Tel: 0300 131 4500 Email: [esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net](mailto:esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net)**

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

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## Reference

The following clinicians have been consulted and agreed this patient information:  
Elaine Tate Head of Podiatry and Orthotics Services, Podiatry Clinical and Team Leads

The directorate group that have agreed this patient information leaflet:  
Community Health and Integrated Care

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Responsible clinician/author: Elaine Tate Head Of Podiatry and Orthotics Services

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