

Patient information

Athletes Foot

What is athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot is a common fungal infection of the skin that affects the feet.

Athlete's foot can lead to intense itching, cracked, blistered or peeling areas of skin, redness and scaling. It can occur on moist waterlogged skin, usually between the fourth and fifth toes initially, or on dry, flaky skin around the heels or elsewhere on the foot. Large painful fissures (cracks) can also develop, and the condition can also spread along the five toes and sometimes to the soles of the feet.



What causes athlete's foot?

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 a warm, moist environment, then fungus can increase in number, causing athlete's foot.

It can also be caused by a number of fungal species that you can pick up from someone else shedding infected skin, typically in communal areas such as pools, showers and changing rooms, or anywhere that you walk around barefoot. Athlete's foot can also be passed on directly by person-to-person contact, although people who sweat more are more prone to infection.

Once your feet have been contaminated, the warm, dark and sweaty environment of feet in shoes or trainers provides the ideal breeding ground for the fungus. However, athlete's foot also occurs in dry, flaky areas. It's quite common in summer with sandal wearers.

The sun makes your skin dry out, so it loses its natural protective oils. This combined with the constant trauma from sandals makes your feet more prone to infection.

Who gets it?

It's not called athlete's foot for nothing! Walking barefoot around swimming pools and spending your life in trainers may make you more likely to pick it up, but you do not need to be an athlete to get this condition.

Is it serious?

If left untreated, the fungus can spread to the toenails, causing thickening and yellowing of the nail, which is much harder to treat. 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?

Athlete's foot is unlikely to get better on its own, but you can buy a number of over-the-counter treatments from the chemist, they usually take a few weeks to work.

It is always best to treat this condition as soon as symptoms are first noticed. Treatments depend on what type of athlete's foot you have. Over-the-counter remedies are always a good starting point, and your GP or podiatrist can also recommend suitable treatments.

For athlete's foot where the skin conditions are dry

If the condition occurs on a dry area of the foot, such as your heel, you need to restore moisture by rubbing in an anti-fungal cream or spray, sometimes combined with a steroid cream (all from your pharmacist). You must remember to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards or use disposable gloves so you don't get the fungus on your hands.

For athlete's foot where the skin conditions are moist

This requires a different treatment. Wash your feet in water as cold as you can bear (hot water only makes your feet fungus-friendly) then dry them thoroughly, preferably with a separate towel or even kitchen roll. It is important to dab your feet dry rather than rub them, as rubbing tends to remove any healing skin. Although the skin may appear flaky and dry, never use moisturiser between your toes, and avoid powders as they can cake up and irritate skin. A spirit-based preparation such as surgical spirit can help - it's cooling, soothing and antiseptic. This may sting a little but will help the moisture evaporate and allow the skin to heal. Only use on unbroken skin.

In severe cases, an anti-fungal tablet may be prescribed. However, tablets are not suitable for everyone, for example pregnant women, so always check with your pharmacist and follow the instructions carefully.

You should also avoid using anti-fungal powders between the toes, although they're good for dusting inside shoes and trainers.

The mistake most people make is to stop their hygiene regime, shoe rotation and/or medication once their symptoms have gone. Although symptoms may disappear after several days or weeks of treatment, the fungus can lie dormant and could eventually reappear in the right environment. Some products require continued treatment for many weeks – always follow the

instructions fully. Also, be alert to symptoms so that you can deal with any problems straight away.

Fungal nails

Prescribed oral medications from your GP or podiatrist can be used for fungal nails. These usually takes between three and six months to get rid of the infection but can take longer. Alternatively, over-the-counter remedies such as anti-fungal nail lacquer can be used. These can take up to a year or more to work as it takes this long for a nail to fully grow out .

How can I prevent it?

The most important tip for preventing athlete's foot is to 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.

When should I see a podiatrist?

Athlete's foot is usually treatable at home, but a pharmacist or a podiatrist may help you pinpoint the best treatment for your particular type of athlete's foot. Your podiatrist can also help if the fungal infection has spread to your nails by reducing the thickness and cutting back the nails thereby exposing the infected nail bed to a lighter, cooler environment.

Nail infections can be treated with topical or oral medications. Oral medication can have side-effects so if you have other medical conditions or are on other medication, your GP or podiatrist may recommend that you don't take it.

If experience any foot care issues that do not resolve themselves naturally or through routine foot care within three weeks; or your foot is red, hot and painful, this could be signs of a more serious infection and you should seek the help of a health care professional.

For more information

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

Or email

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
The Royal College of Podiatry www.cop.uk
NHS choices 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.

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

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

Reference

The following clinicians have been consulted and agreed this patient information:
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The directorate group that have agreed this patient information leaflet:
Community Health & Integrated Care

Next review date: September 2025
Responsible clinician/author: Elaine Tate Head of Podiatry and Orthotics Services

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