

Fungal Nail Infections

Fungal infection of nails is common. The infection causes thickened and unsightly nails which sometimes become painful. Medication often works well to clear the infection, but you need to take medication for several months.

How do you get a fungal nail infection?

- Spread from a fungal skin infection such as athlete's foot.
- Fingernail infection may occur after a toenail infection has become established. The fungus may spread to a finger if you scratch your itchy toes and toenail.
- Fingernail infections are also more likely to occur if you wash your hands frequently, or have them in water a lot. For example, if you are a cook or a cleaner. Constant washing may damage the protective skin at the base of the nail. This may allow fungi to enter.
- A nail that has recently been damaged is also more likely to become infected.
- You have an increased risk of developing a fungal nail infection if you have various other conditions such as diabetes or psoriasis or if you smoke.

Not treating

This is an option if the infection is mild or causing no symptoms. For example, a single small toenail may be infected and remain painless and of little concern. Some people may prefer not to take treatment because:

- Treatment does not always cure the infection. Cure rates are about 60-80%.
- Treatment that clears the infection does not always restore the nail's appearance to normal.
- The antifungal medicines used for treatment need to be taken for several months - sometimes longer.
- Although rare, unpleasant side-effects sometimes occur with antifungal medicines, therefore a blood test will be taken 6 weeks after commencing treatment.

Treatment

Antifungal nail paint (nail lacquer)

A nail lacquer that contains the antifungal medicine amorolfine is an alternative for most (but not all) types of fungi that infect nails. However, this tends not to work as well as medication taken by mouth. Your doctor will advise if it is a suitable option for your type of infection. For example, it may be useful if the infection is just towards the end of the nail. This treatment does not tend to work so well if the infection is near the skin, or involves the skin around the nail.

The nail lacquer has to be put on exactly as prescribed for the best chance of success. You may need six months of nail lacquer treatment for fingernails, and up to a year for toenails.

Antifungal tablets:

- Terbinafine tablets. The usual adult dose is 250 mg once a day; for between 6 weeks and 3 months for fingernails, and for 3–6 months for toenails. Visible improvement can be expected after the end of two months of treatment for fingernails and three months of treatment for toenails.
- Itraconazole tablets. This is usually given as pulsed treatment. That is, for an adult: 200 mg twice a day for one week, with subsequent courses repeated after a further 21 days. Fingernail infections require two pulsed courses and toenail infections require at least three pulsed courses.

Studies suggest that in about 5 in 10 cases the nail will look fully normal again after treatment. In about a further 2 in 10 cases the fungus will be cleared from the nail after treatment, but the nail does not look fully normal again. Fingernails tend to respond better to treatment than toenails do. One reason for treatment to fail is because some people stop their medication too early.

Nail removal

If other treatments have failed, an option is to have the nail removed by a small operation done under local anesthetic. This is combined with treatment with antifungal medication.

Tips on Nail care

Tips on nail care if you have a nail infection, with or without taking medication, include the following:

- Keep your nails cut short, and file down any thickened nail.
- Use a separate pair of scissors to cut the infected nail(s) to prevent contaminating the other nails. Do not share nail scissors with anyone else (for the same reason).
- Avoid injury and irritants to your nails. For example, if fingers are affected, use cotton and vinyl gloves for wet work. Use heavy cotton gloves for dry work.
- If toenails are affected, wear properly fitted shoes with a wide toe box.

Preventing fungal nail infections

Studies suggest that in about 1 in 4 cases where the infection has been cleared from the nail, the infection returns within three years. One way to help prevent a further bout of nail infection is to treat athlete's foot as early as possible to stop the infection spreading to the nail. Athlete's foot is common and may recur from time to time. It is easy to treat with an antifungal cream which you can buy from pharmacies, or get on prescription. The first sign of athlete's foot is itchy and scaling skin between the toes.

- Try to avoid injury to nails, which may increase the risk of developing a nail infection.
- Wear footwear such as flip-flops in public places, such as communal bathing/shower places, locker rooms, etc.
- Avoid towel sharing.
- Consider replacing old footwear, as this could be contaminated with fungal spores.
- Keep your feet cool and dry as much as possible.