

# Fungal Nail Infections

Information for patients

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**Podiatry Department**

## **What is this leaflet about?**

This leaflet is about fungal nails. This is a common, but harmless condition which can affect one nail or can spread to multiple nails. It more commonly affects toenails but can also affect fingernails.

## **What causes fungal nails?**

Fungal nails are caused by a fungal infection. Fungal infections can be picked up by walking barefoot in communal areas and by sharing items such as nail clippers, shoes and bath mats.

Fungus grows in dark, warm, moist areas. So when your feet are damp and enclosed in socks and shoes, this provides the ideal environment for the fungus to multiply and spread.

## **Signs and symptoms**

- The nail can appear yellow or white, usually affecting the free edge of the nail first
- The nail can become thickened and crumbly.

In most cases fungal nails are not painful and do not need to be treated. However, some can cause discomfort when they become thickened and press on the inside of the shoe.

## **Treatments available**

There is no definitive cure for fungal nails. There are many treatments which you can try, but it is only necessary if the fungal nail is causing you problems or if you are concerned about the appearance of it.

If the nail has become thickened, it may cause discomfort when wearing shoes and can look different. Simply filing down the thickness of the nail can help with these issues. It is easiest to file them when the nails are dry. You should use a separate disposable emery board on the infected nail(s) to avoid spreading the infection to healthy ones.

There are treatments that you can try at home if you wish. The length of time that treatments should be carried out varies between each treatment. These treatments should be carried out as directed by the instructions, but stop if the fungal nail infection resolves or causes irritation to the surrounding skin.

1. Anti-fungal nail paints and lacquers are available over-the-counter. Ask your pharmacist for advice and always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Most need to be applied daily. It may take 6-18 months to see any effects.
2. Nail softening kits are available over-the-counter. Ask your pharmacist for advice and always follow the manufacturer's instructions. These kits contain 40% urea paste, plasters and a nail scraper. The paste is applied to a clean, dry nail then covered with the plaster for 24 hours. This softens the nail, allowing the infected part to be scrapped away. The process is to be repeated every few days and it can take several months to see any results.

Oral anti-fungal tablets are sometimes prescribed by a GP. Like other treatments, they are not guaranteed to get rid of your fungal nail infection. An initial blood test is needed to check your liver function is adequate and then regular blood tests during treatment. The tablets are usually taken over a course of up to 3 months or more, as advised by your GP.

**Warning:** Oral anti-fungal treatments can cause liver damage as a side-effect. They are not suitable for anyone who is pregnant, or those with certain medical conditions. They are not recommended as a first-line treatment.

Many private podiatrists offer treatments such as laser therapy or nail surgery to remove the infected nail. As with all other treatments, there is no guarantee this will get rid of a fungal nail infection.

## How to prevent the spread of fungal nails

Using the same nail clippers or files for all nails can cause the infection to spread to healthy nails. Instead, you should use a separate disposable file on the infected nails.

Keep your feet clean and dry them well. Change your socks daily or sooner if they get wet. Allow shoes to air-dry after each use. Wear flip-flops when in communal swimming pools, showers and changing areas. Throw out old shoes and use anti-fungal sprays inside shoes which may be infected with fungus or athlete's foot. Avoid sharing shoes or buying second hand footwear. When trying on shoes in shops, always wear socks.

## When to seek help

NHS Lothian Podiatry Department does not provide routine treatment for fungal nails. However, if the surrounding skin becomes **red, hot, swollen and there is fluid or pus** leaking, this may be a sign that you have caused trauma to the skin and there may be an infection. You should contact your GP or Podiatry Department immediately if this happens.

If you decide to seek help from private podiatrists make sure they are registered with Health and Care Professional Council (HCPC).

Check the register at: [www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org)

### Further information:

NHS inform website: [www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot) - search for: "fungal nail infection"