

Patient information from BMJ

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Athlete's foot

Athlete's foot is an infection that can make the skin on your feet flaky and itchy. It isn't serious. But it's better to treat it sooner rather than later, as the infection can spread and become harder to treat.

You can use our information to talk to your doctor or pharmacist and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot is a skin infection caused by tiny fungi called dermatophytes.

It is very easy to catch athlete's foot. You can pick it up if you walk barefoot in warm, damp places, such as in the changing rooms and showers at gyms. Or you can catch it if you touch the skin of someone who already has it.

Your feet are the perfect place for this infection to grow, especially between your toes. Your feet are warm, often slightly damp, and full of keratin, a protein found in nails, skin, and hair. The fungi that cause athlete's foot feed on keratin.

What are the symptoms?

Athlete's foot can cause lots of different symptoms, including:

- itchy feet, especially between your toes
- soggy skin between your toes
- dryness and flaking on the soles of your feet
- red patches on your skin with a white, wet-looking surface
- thickened skin on your feet, and
- blisters.

If your skin gets hot, red, and swollen, you could also have an infection caused by bacteria. You'll need antibiotics to treat this. Otherwise it may spread. If you think you have a bacterial infection as well as athlete's foot, see your doctor.

What treatments work?

There are several treatments you can buy over the counter for athlete's foot. These work by killing the fungi that cause the infection.

Many treatments come as creams that you rub on your foot once or twice daily. You continue using the treatment until you've had no signs of the infection for one to two weeks. Treatment usually takes two to six weeks.

Treatments for athlete's foot contain different types of medication and are sold under different brand names. You'll need to look at the 'active ingredients' on the label to find out which medicine they contain.

- Studies suggest that medicines called **allylamines** work best for athlete's foot. Examples include **terbinafine**, **naftifine**, and **butenafine**.
- Other medicines for athlete's foot include **azoles** (miconazole, clotrimazole, econazole, and ketoconazole), **ciclopirox**, and **tolnaftate**. These medicines can also clear up athlete's foot, but they may not work quite as well as allylamines.

If your athlete's foot is causing blisters or sores, your doctor may also recommend that you soak your affected foot (or feet) in water mixed with a medicine called **aluminium acetate**. This can relieve pain and help your skin to heal. You will probably need to do this twice a day, for seven days.

Things you can do for yourself

We don't know whether washing and drying your feet carefully and wearing clean socks every day can help to get rid of athlete's foot once you have it. But keeping your feet clean and dry should help you avoid getting athlete's foot again. Here are some tips.

- Take off your shoes when you're at home, and let air get to your feet. If your shoes get sweaty, let them dry out before wearing them again.
- When you can, wear sandals to let the air get to your feet. Or wear shoes made from leather or canvas. These natural materials let your feet breathe more than materials that are man-made.

If you have diabetes, speak to your doctor about the best type of shoes or sandals and socks to wear. It's important not to risk getting cuts or scrapes on your feet.

- Always take off sweaty sports socks and shoes when you have finished using them.
- Put on clean socks every day.
- Wear socks that absorb sweat. Fabrics that wick away moisture include wool, nylon, silk, and many synthetics and synthetic blends.
- Don't borrow other people's shoes.
- After you have a bath or shower, dry your feet carefully, especially between your toes.
- Wear flip-flops or sandals in public changing rooms and around pools.

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- If you've had athlete's foot, spray the inside of your shoes with a spray to kill the fungus (called an antifungal spray).

What will happen to me?

Athlete's foot isn't serious, and treatments that you put on your feet will usually get rid of the infection. However, if you don't treat athlete's foot, the infection may spread to your fingernails and your toenails, where it is harder to treat. If you have any questions or concerns, see your doctor.

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