

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Dec 06, 2021

Fungal nail infections

If your nail is thick and looks white or yellow, it may be infected with fungus. Nail infections don't look pleasant but they are not serious. There are treatments that you can use to try to clear up the infection.

What is a fungal nail infection?

Fungal nail infections are caused by fungi that live in warm, damp places, such as showers and floors around changing rooms.

It's easy to catch a fungal nail infection and many people get them. The sooner you treat an infection the easier it is to get rid of it.

There are treatments for these infections. But they can take a long time to work - several months if the infection is bad.

What are the symptoms?

Toenail infections are more common than infections in fingernails. But fingernail infections may bother people more because of how they look.

An infected nail may look whitish or yellowish and may be raised up from the finger or toe. The skin around your nail may turn red. Sometimes the nail lifts off altogether. If the infection is severe, the nail may be crumbly. A severe toenail infection can sometimes spread to the sides and sole of the foot.

If you've had an infection for a long time it may be painful. If you have a badly infected toe it may be difficult to walk.

Things that make you more likely to get fungal nail infections include having diabetes or a condition that causes a weak immune system. The infection can also be more serious if you have one of these conditions. So it's important to see your doctor as soon as possible if you think you have a nail infection.

What treatments work?

We've focused on the research for fungal toenail infections. These infections are the most common type and can be more difficult to treat than infections of the fingernails.

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Pills

Most people with fungal nail infections need to take pills called antifungals. You will need a prescription from your doctor for these.

You'll probably need to take the pills for at least several weeks, and possibly for several months. How long you need to take them will depend on how severe the infection is and on which pills your doctor prescribes.

The pills won't change the way your nail looks in the short term. They kill the fungus so that the nail can grow back normally. But it takes months for a nail to grow back fully, so you won't see results right away.

Antifungal pills can cause side effects in some people, including diarrhea or a rash. But these problems are usually mild.

Serious side effects are rare but you need to know about them. Some antifungal pills can cause liver problems. If you take them you'll need regular blood tests to make sure your liver is working properly. You should call your doctor straight away if you get nausea, vomiting, fatigue, abdominal pain, or dark-colored urine.

There is also a very small risk of heart problems. Call your doctor straight away if you have any of these symptoms: trouble catching your breath, a cough, feeling weak, feeling very tired, feeling confused, weight gain, or swelling in your legs or feet.

Lotions and lacquers

If your infection is not severe, you can try an antifungal lotion or lacquer on your nails. These are called topical treatments. They don't work as well as pills for fungal infections. But many people prefer these topical treatments because there are fewer side effects than with pills, although they can cause some itching, swelling, and burning around the nail.

You may be able to buy some topical treatments from a pharmacy without a prescription. But for the strongest versions you will probably need a prescription.

Some of these topical treatments need to be applied once or twice a day, and others several times a week. You'll probably need to use the treatment for at least several weeks, and sometimes for much longer. Toenails usually take longer to treat than fingernails.

Things you can do to prevent infection

There are some things you can do to reduce your chances of getting a fungal infection in your nails.

Keeping your feet and hands clean and dry is the best protection. You can also:

- take off your shoes when you're at home, to let the air get to your feet
- wear shoes made from leather or canvas rather than plastic
- make sure your shoes fit well
- avoid borrowing other people's shoes

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- change your socks every day, especially when it's warm
- dry your feet well after washing, especially after using communal changing areas
- avoid walking barefoot in public areas, such as around swimming pools or gyms. Wear flip-flops or sandals
- avoid borrowing other people's towels.

What will happen to me?

Treatment takes time. If your nail has come off, it won't grow back until after the infection has gone away. For some people it can take as long as one year for their nail to grow back fully.

It is common for fungal nail infections to come back. So you may need to have treatment again.

If your nail infection doesn't bother you, you may decide not to have it treated. If you don't have it treated it probably won't affect your health, although it's possible the infection will get worse.

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