BMJ Best Practice

How to avoid getting a fungal nail infection

There are a lot of things you can do to reduce your chances of getting a fungal infection in your nails or on your skin. The itchy, flaky skin that people get on their toes when they have athlete's foot is also caused by a fungus.

Keeping your feet and hands clean and dry is your best protection. But there are several other things you can also do.

Tips for avoiding infections

Your shoes and socks

- 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.

- Wear sandals to let the air get to your toes (if you have diabetes, you may need to wear special sandals - talk to your doctor). Or wear shoes made from leather or canvas. These natural materials let your feet breathe more than materials that are man-made.

- Don't spend any more time than you need to in sweaty sports shoes.

- Try to find shoes that don't have any seams on the inside near your toes, so they don't damage your toenails.

- Make sure your shoes fit well. If your shoes are too short, they can damage your toenails by rubbing against them. If they are too long, they can damage your nails because your foot moves around too much inside the shoe. You should also make sure your shoes aren't too tight.

- Don't borrow other people's shoes.

- Wear socks that absorb sweat. Fabrics that wick away moisture include wool, nylon, and polypropylene.

- Change your socks every day, especially when it's warm. Washing your socks kills the fungus that causes nail infections.

In public places

- Dry your feet well, especially after using communal changing areas. Make sure the skin between your toes is dry.

- Don't walk barefoot in public areas (for example, around gyms). Wear flip-flops or sandals.

- Don't borrow other people's towels.

Tips for keeping your nails healthy

- Keep your toenails short and trim them straight across.

- File down any thick areas.

- Never use the same scissors, files, or nail clippers on infected and uninfected nails. If you do, the infection may spread.

- Don't pick at the skin around your nails. This can give the infection an easy way in.

- If you get a manicure or pedicure, make sure you go to a reputable nail salon that sterilizes its instruments between customers.

If you do get an infection

- Get it treated. This will stop the infection from spreading to other nails. And use an antifungal powder in your shoes.

- Don't use nail polish or artificial nails. This can trap moisture and make your infection worse.

- If you have athlete's foot, get it treated and check everyone in your family. Make sure they are treated if they have it. The fungus that causes athlete's foot can spread to your nails. If you've had athlete's foot, spray the inside of your shoes with an antifungal spray so you don't catch it again.

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