



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

Therapy Services Fact Sheet

Fungal Nail Infections

Definition

A fungal infection of the nail is called onychomycosis (pronounced “on-ee-koh-my-kosis”). This condition can affect both fingernails and toenails. However toenails are more likely to become infected. The fungus infects the nail plate and the nail bed. The fungal infection may cause the nail to become discoloured and thick. It rarely causes discomfort, however thickened nails can cause pain in shoes.

Incidence

The prevalence of fungal infections rises sharply among adults older than 60 years of age (30% of the population).

How can you get a fungal nail infection?

Fungi are everywhere, including the skin. It’s difficult to avoid coming in contact with these microscopic organisms. Fungi grow in dark, warm, damp places. The toenails are naturally vulnerable to fungal infections because they are covered in shoes, socks and stockings. When feet sweat, the inside of shoes and socks becomes damp and produce conditions conducive to fungal infection.

If you often walk barefooted in locker rooms, swimming pools and showers, you can pick up a fungus from the warm wet floors. People who suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes circulatory problems or immune-deficiency conditions have an increase risk for developing fungal infections. Injury to the nail bed may make it more susceptible to all types of infections.

Diagnosis

Although your podiatrist or general practitioner can diagnose onychomycosis clinically with some degree of certainty, laboratory confirmation (i.e. fungal scraping of the nail) is essential for an accurate diagnosis and for instigating the appropriate antifungal therapy.

Treatment

Depending on the nature of the infection and the severity of each case, treatment may vary. Topical antifungal creams and liquids are only effective with mild infections of the nail plate. These topical agents need to be applied regularly (twice a day) for a long period of time (6-12 months).

Toenails must be filed before each application to ensure the medication penetrates properly.

Antifungal creams and liquid have fallen out of favour with the development of new effective oral medications. It is essential that a definitive laboratory diagnosis is made prior to taking oral antifungal medication. The laboratory diagnosis will not only determine if it is a fungal infection of the toenail but also what type of fungus it is. This will determine whether oral antifungal therapy will be effective or not. Oral medication and side effects should be discussed with your general practitioner.

Prevention

Because fungi can be found in most places, including the skin, they can be present long before they find opportunities to strike, and before signs of infection appear. By following precautions, including proper hygiene and regular inspection of the feet and toes, chances of infection are significantly reduced. Here are some tips on how to prevent fungal infection of the toenails:

- Avoid walking barefoot in public areas, such as locker rooms. Shower shoes should be worn.
- Wear 100% cotton socks and change them daily.
- Wash feet daily with a mild soap.
- Dry feet and nails immediately after shower/bath.
- If any part of the shoe becomes damp (e.g. innersoles), leave shoes outside to dry completely before wearing them again.
- Nails should be completely dry before applying nail polish.

If you have any problems or questions regarding fungal infections of the toenails, ask your Podiatrist or General Practitioner.

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