

Mycotic Nails

Fungal toenail infections are a common foot health problem.

These infections can persist for years without ever causing pain. The disease, characterized by a change in a toenail's color, is often considered nothing more than cosmetic, but it can present serious problems if left untreated.

Also referred to as Onychomycosis, fungal nail infections are an infection underneath the surface of the nail, which can also penetrate the nail. In addition to causing difficulty and pain when walking or running, fungal nail infections are often accompanied by a secondary bacterial and/or yeast infection in or about the nail plate.

A group of fungi called dermatophytes easily attack the nail, thriving off keratin, the nail's protein substance. When the tiny organisms take hold, the nail may become thicker, yellowish-brown or darker in color and foul smelling. Debris may collect beneath the nail plate, white marks frequently appear on the nail plate, and the infection is capable of spreading to other toenails, the skin or even the fingernails.

Nail bed injury may make the nail more susceptible to all types of infection, including fungal infection. Those who suffer chronic diseases, such as diabetes, circulatory problems or immune-deficiency conditions are especially prone to fungal nails. Other contributory factors may be a history of Athlete's foot and excessive perspiration.

You can prevent fungal nail infections by taking these simple precautions:

- Exercise proper hygiene and regularly inspect your feet and toes.
- Keep your feet clean and dry.
- Wear shower shoes in public facilities whenever possible.
- Clip your nails straight across so that the nail does not extend beyond the tip of the toe.
- Use a quality foot powder - talcum, not cornstarch - in conjunction with shoes that fit well and are made of materials that breathe.
- Avoid wearing excessively tight hosiery, which promotes moisture. Socks made of synthetic fiber tend to "wick" away moisture faster than cotton or wool socks, especially for those with more active life styles.
- Disinfect home pedicure tools and don't apply polish to nails suspected of infection.

Depending on the type of infection you have, over-the-counter liquid antifungal agents, while sometimes effective, may not prevent a fungal infection from recurring. A topical or oral medication may need to be prescribed, and the diseased nail matter and debris removed by a process called debridement.

In some cases surgical treatment is prescribed, during which the infected nail is removed. Permanent removal of a chronically painful nail, which has not responded to any other treatment, permits the fungal infection to be cured and prevents the return of a deformed nail.