

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Fungal nail infections

If your nail is crumbly and white, it may be infected with fungus. Nail infections don't look pleasant, but they are not serious. There are treatments that can make them go away.

What is a fungal nail infection?

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

The fungi that cause these infections live in warm, damp places, such as showers, and floors around swimming pools and in changing rooms.

People used to think there was nothing you could do about a fungal nail infection. But there are now good treatments that can get rid of it. However, they take a long time to work (as long as one year if the infection is bad). So you need to be patient.

You may have heard this condition called tinea or ringworm.

What are the symptoms?

Your nail may look white or yellow, crumbly, and raised up from the finger or toe. The skin around your nail may go red. Sometimes the nail lifts off altogether. It's more common to get an infection of a toenail than a fingernail.

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.

If you have diabetes and you think you have a fungal nail infection, you should see your doctor as soon as you can. Diabetes can cause damage to the nerves and blood vessels in your feet. So, if you have a fungal nail infection it may take a long time to heal.

If your immune system is weak, a fungal nail infection is more serious. If you have HIV or AIDS, or if you are on chemotherapy, you may be more likely to get infections. So it's important to see your doctor as soon as possible if you think you have a nail infection.

What treatments work?

To get rid of a fungal nail infection you will probably have to take tablets, sometimes for several months. There are also creams and varnishes you can put on your nail, and things you can do to try to avoid getting another nail infection.

Tablets

The tablets that doctors use most often are called **itraconazole** (brand name Sporanox) and **terbinafine** (Lamisil). Terbinafine seems to work slightly better.

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If you take terbinafine every day for 12 weeks, there's a 6 in 10 chance you'll get rid of your fungal nail infection. If you take it every day for 24 weeks, there's a 9 in 10 chance you'll get rid of it.

You'll need to take itraconazole tablets for at least three months. There are two ways you can take them: either every day, or for one week in every four weeks. The two ways seem to work equally well. There's a 6 in 10 chance you'll get rid of your fungal nail infection.

All antifungal tablets can cause diarrhoea or a rash, which are usually mild. Not many people get these problems.

Sometimes people get more serious side effects. These are rare but you need to know about them. Terbinafine and itraconazole can cause liver problems. You'll need regular blood tests to make sure your liver is working properly. You should call your doctor straight away if you get any of these symptoms: nausea, vomiting, fatigue, abdominal pain, or dark-coloured 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.

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

Creams, lotions, and varnish

Instead of taking tablets to treat your fungal nail infection, you can try an antifungal cream, lotion, or varnish on your nails. These are called topical treatments. Many people prefer these because there are fewer side effects than with tablets, although they can cause some itching, swelling, and burning around the nail. Also, we can't say whether or not they work because there hasn't been enough good-quality research. You may wish to try one if the infection is mild.

Some common topical treatments are amorolfine (brand names Loceryl and Curanail) and tioconazole (Trosyl). You need a prescription for Loceryl and Trosyl but you can buy Curanail from the pharmacy. You may get some soreness and redness around the nail, but this doesn't usually stop people using the treatment.

You put some medicines on your nails once or twice a day, and others once or twice a week. You'll probably need to use the treatment every day for several months, or even one year. Toenails usually take longer to treat than fingernails.

Things you can do yourself

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

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Keeping your feet and hands clean and dry is the best protection. But there are many other things you can do. Here are some examples.

- Take off your shoes when you're at home, to let the air get to your feet.
- Wear shoes made from leather or canvas that let your feet breathe.
- Make sure your shoes fit well.
- Don't borrow other people's shoes.
- Change your socks every day, especially when it's warm.
- Dry your feet well, especially after using communal changing areas.
- Don't walk barefoot in public areas, such as around swimming pools or gyms. Wear flip-flops or sandals.
- Don't borrow 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.

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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