

WHAT IS A FUNGAL NAIL INFECTION?

Definition

It's not just a cosmetic problem. It's an infection of the bed and plate underlying the surface of a nail. Fungal nail infection, a condition called onychomycosis (ON-i-ko-my-KO-sis), is caused primarily by organisms called dermatophytes. It's extraordinarily common, afflicting more than 35 million people in the United States alone. However, some 90% of them have yet to see a doctor for treatment.

Once these tiny organisms find their way under a nail, they begin to multiply. Ironically, when the fungus finds its way under the nail, the nail itself provides a protective environment for the fungus to thrive. The toenails are most vulnerable to infection, since they spend much of their day surrounded by dark, warm, and often moist shoes and socks.

Symptoms

When fungal nail infection begins to take hold, it can cause the nail to change color, often to a yellow/green or darker color. Debris may collect under the nail, causing a foul smell. The nail may thicken and become flaky. Thick toenails, in particular, may cause discomfort in shoes and may even make standing and walking uncomfortable for some people.

Moreover, because fungal nail infection is an infection, it can spread to other nails, and possibly to other people. Something as ordinary as an emery board can carry the fungal organisms from an infected nail to an uninfected one. That's why it is so important to seek treatment as soon as you think you have an infection.

Your doctor may wish to take clippings off your nail before he/she starts treating you, to make sure that the problem is caused by a fungus.

How Do You Get It?

Fungal nail infection has little to do with personal cleanliness. Something as simple as banging a toe or finger, trimming your nails too closely, or wearing tight shoes is enough to weaken the nail and expose the underlying nail bed to infection.

The fungus that causes the infection resides in many common places: locker rooms, swimming pools, showers, even your

garden. You can also contract the infection while getting a manicure or pedicure, from unsterilized instruments that have been used on others with the infection. Some people have chronic disorders that make them more susceptible to fungal nail infection. People with diabetes, circulatory problems, and immunological deficiencies (such as AIDS/HIV infection) are at increased risk, as are the elderly. Moreover, fungal nail infection appears to be more prevalent in those with a history of athlete's foot (a fungal infection of the skin) and people whose feet perspire a lot.

How Do You Treat It?

Fungal nail infection won't go away by itself. The most effective treatments are only available from your doctor.

What Can You Do?

There are also steps you can take during and after your treatment to take better care of your nails:

- Keep your feet as clean and dry as possible; you may want to use a talcum foot powder.
- Use shower shoes when walking in public swimming and shower areas.
- Clip your toenails straight across so that the nail does not extend beyond the tip of the toe.
- Wear comfortable shoes that fit properly.