

# Athlete's foot

Information & advice for self-care

**Note:** Please be aware that unless you have developed a foot wound, it is unlikely your referral for treatment of athlete's foot will be accepted. If you are diabetic or are on immunosuppressant medication(s), please consult with your GP or pharmacist before applying any over-the-counter medication on your feet.

## What is athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot is a fungal infection of the skin that can lead to intense itching, cracked, blistered or peeling areas of skin, redness and scaling. It can occur on moist, waterlogged skin, usually between the fourth and fifth toes initially, or on dry, flaky skin around the heels or elsewhere on the foot. Large painful fissures can also develop and the condition can spread along all five toes, and sometimes to the soles of the feet if left untreated.

## What causes it?

It is caused by a number of fungal species that you can pick up from someone else shedding infected skin, typically in communal areas such as pools, showers and changing rooms, or anywhere that you walk around barefoot. Athlete's foot can also be passed on directly by person-to-person contact, although people who sweat more are more prone to infection.

Once your feet have been contaminated, the warm, dark and sweaty environment of feet in shoes or trainers provides the ideal breeding ground for the fungus. However, athlete's foot also occurs in dry, flaky areas. It's quite common in summer with sandal wearers. The sun makes your skin dry out, so it loses its natural protective oils. This, combined with the constant trauma from sandals, makes your feet more prone to infection.



## Who gets it?

It's not called athlete's foot for nothing! Walking barefoot around swimming pools and spending your life in trainers may make you more likely to pick it up, but you do not need to be an athlete to get this condition.

## Is it serious?

If left untreated, the fungus can spread to the toe nails, causing thickening and yellowing of the nail, which is much harder to treat. Fungal infections are highly contagious and can spread to anywhere on your skin, including your scalp, hands and even your groin. This is especially likely if you use the same towel for your feet as for the rest of your body.

## What are the treatments?

It is always best to treat this condition as soon as symptoms are first noticed. Treatments depend on what type of athlete's foot you have. Over-the-counter remedies are always a good starting point, and your GP or podiatrist can also recommend suitable treatments.

### ***For athlete's foot where the skin conditions are dry:***

If the condition occurs on a dry area of the foot, such as your heel, you need to restore moisture by rubbing in an anti-fungal cream or spray, sometimes combined with a steroid cream (all from your pharmacist). You must remember to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards, or use disposable gloves so you don't get the fungus on your hands.

### ***For athlete's foot where the skin conditions are moist:***

This requires a different treatment. Wash your feet in water as cold as you can bear (hot water only makes your feet fungus-friendly), then dry them thoroughly, preferably with a separate towel or even kitchen roll. It is important to dab your feet dry rather than rub them, as rubbing tends to remove any healing skin.

Although the skin may appear flaky and dry, never use moisturiser between your toes, and avoid powders as they can cake up and irritate skin. A spirit-based preparation such as surgical spirit can help - it's cooling, soothing and antiseptic. This may sting a little but will help the moisture evaporate and allow the skin to heal. Only use on unbroken skin.

In severe cases, an anti-fungal tablet may be prescribed. However, tablets are not suitable for everyone, for example pregnant women, so always check with your pharmacist and follow the instructions carefully.

You should also avoid using anti-fungal powders between the toes, although they're good for dusting inside shoes and trainers.

The mistake most people make is to stop their hygiene regime, shoe rotation and/or medication once their symptoms have gone. Although symptoms may disappear after several days or weeks of treatment, the fungus can lie dormant and could eventually reappear in the right environment. Some products require continued treatment for many weeks – always follow the instructions fully. Also, be alert to symptoms so that you can deal with any problems straight away.

### **Fungal nails**

Prescribed oral medications from your GP or podiatrist can be used for fungal nails. These usually take between three and six months to get rid of the infection but can take longer. Alternatively, over-the-counter remedies such as anti-fungal nail lacquer can be used. These can take up to a year or more to work as it takes this long for a nail to fully grow out.

### **How can I prevent it?**

The most important tip for preventing athlete's foot is to ensure your feet are completely dry after washing them and before you put your shoes and socks on. However, there are many things you can do to make your feet less hospitable to fungal infections:

- Firstly, change your footwear on a regular basis. There's no point treating your feet if you constantly re-infect them by putting them into damp, fungally infected shoes. It takes 24-48 hours for shoes to dry out properly, so alternate your shoes daily
- If you really have to wear the same pair day after day (say, if you're on holiday), dry them out by using a hairdryer on a cold setting; this will get rid of the perspiration quickly without creating more heat. To help shoes dry out more quickly, take any insoles out, loosen any laces and open your shoes out fully so that air can circulate. When buying, choose trainers with ventilation holes
- If your shoes are so tight that they squeeze your toes together, this allows moisture to gather between your toes and encourages fungus. Instead, let air circulate between the toes by choosing footwear with a wider, deeper toe box and choose shoes made from natural materials. Of course, you should also change your socks daily

- Wear flip-flops in the bathroom and in public showers. This will ensure that you don't leave any shed skin for others to pick up, and it will also stop you picking up other species of fungus
- Finally, never wear anyone else's footwear

### **When should I see an NHS podiatrist?**

If you have any foot health concerns and think this may potentially lead to a complication, please consider discussing a podiatry referral with your GP.

If your foot becomes red, hot or swollen with new pain, with or without a wound, please ask your GP to refer you to the Podiatry Service.



### **Compliments, concerns or complaints**

PALS may be the best starting point if you have a question or concern. If you would like to find an NHS dentist, know where your nearest doctor is or talk through a problem you have had with a service, you can contact the PALS service.

**Tel:** 01502 445447

**Email:** [ECCH.patientliaison@nhs.net](mailto:ECCH.patientliaison@nhs.net)

#### **Or write to:**

PALS, East Coast Community Healthcare,  
Hamilton House, Battery Green Road,  
Lowestoft, NR32 1DE

This content was produced by the College of Podiatry. Find out more:

<https://cop.org.uk/common-foot-problems>



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