

THE FUNGUS AMONG US

SUMMER IS THE SEASON OF BARE FEET AND FLIP FLOPS, OF SWIMMING POOLS AND BALLGAMES AND LOTS OF SWEAT. AND THAT MAKES IT A BREEDING GROUND FOR FUNGUS TO CREEP INTO YOUR LIFE AND ONTO YOUR FEET.

BY COLLEEN COOKE



BEYOND DRY SKIN

How can you tell if you simply have dry skin or if it's turned into a fungal infection? Athlete's foot – or tinea pedis – can form in three ways:

- **FLUID-FILLED BLISTERS CALLED VESICLES**, usually on the bottom of the feet. These become itchy and eventually they pop and drain, leaving dry skin. Be careful about scratching these blisters too much; if you cause open sores, you run the risk of contracting a bacterial infection on top of a fungal infection.
- **A MOCCASIN-SHAPED INFECTION.** It starts with some soreness on the foot, and then the skin on the bottom or heel becomes thick and cracks.
- **INTERSPACE INFECTION.** The spaces between your toes look like you've been in the bathtub too long. The skin becomes scaly, then it peels and cracks. Again, this break in the skin can cause bacterial infection as well.

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CONTAGIOUS AND UBIQUITOUS

WHO GETS ATHLETE'S FOOT?

It's not just athletes, despite the name. Children and teenagers are prone to contracting the infection, sometimes because of poor hygiene or because they're more exposed to locker rooms and really sweaty feet. Dr. Eriksen says older people tend to get the infection in the nails.

"Dry skin and psoriasis can also look like athlete's foot, and it may be hard to distinguish one from the other," says Dr. Michael Fine of Fine Foot Care Center in North Kansas City. "You want to make sure you're treating the right condition."

The same fungus that causes the bottom of your foot to itch is also responsible for infections in your nails. "The nail is the harboring ground for this fungus," says Dr. Erich Eriksen of Fine Foot Care Center. "Once you have it in the nail, you're probably going to have it in the skin."

The fungus can be spread by skin particles left on shower floors, around swimming pools, on towels and shoes.

"Once it's on the skin and in the environment, it's easy to re-contaminate itself because **it's a fungus, it's contagious and it's found everywhere in the environment** – showers, beds, shoes, socks," Dr. Eriksen says.

DID YOU KNOW?

You can get athlete's foot on your hands. The fungus is equal opportunity, so if your hands are often in that moist, warm environment that the fungus favors, or if your hands come into contact with the fungus and you have a break in the skin on your hands or fingernails, it will make the leap there.



PREVENTION

To keep fungal infections at bay, take some common sense steps:

- Change your socks regularly – that might include more than once a day if you sweat a lot. Cotton-blend socks are better than 100 percent cotton socks for keeping the feet dry.
- Keep your environment clean – especially in wet areas like the bathroom. Clean your shower or tub with bleach or Lysol at least once a week, especially if you share the room with others.
- Check your feet in between the toes and your nails for breakage.
- Spray your shoes with Lysol once or twice a week.
- Change your shoes after every 500 miles (three to six months depending on how active you are).
- Be careful in public areas because you can cross contaminate that way. Always wear flip-flops in public showers like locker rooms or dorms. And it doesn't hurt to wear them at home if the kids are at the pool or locker room a lot.

"If someone is continually getting athlete's foot, I have them use anti-fungal powder every morning and change their socks and apply more powder in the middle of the day," Dr. Fine says. "I tell them to get in the habit of just using an anti-fungal powder forever."



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- itching, burning or stinging between the toes or on your soles
- scales, cracks, cuts, peeling skin or blisters between the toes or on your soles
- dry skin on the sides or bottoms of your feet
- bumps on your feet
- cracked, blistered or peeling areas between your toes
- redness and scaling on your soles



Athlete's foot on the sole of the foot



Athlete's foot with a secondary bacterial infection



Another way athlete's foot can appear

It's easy to hope that the itchiness or dry skin will go away on its own or with some simple moisturizer, but you need to pay attention to the condition of your feet to make sure it doesn't develop into something more serious.

"One mistake people make is that they don't treat it in a timely manner; they think it will go away," Dr. Fine says. "In my opinion, the hardest thing is not getting rid of foot fungus, but keeping it from coming back. Moisture has a lot to do with that, especially with teenagers – they get athlete's foot all the time. The fungus loves that warm, moist environment that the feet are in."

The fungus is an opportunistic infection, which means it can strike harder on those who already have compromised immune systems, such as diabetics.



TREATMENT

If you catch it early, over-the-counter products such as anti-fungal powder or creams and ointments can do the trick. And if the infection has reached your toenails, a pill like Lamisil will attack the infection through the bloodstream. But make sure to monitor your feet and don't assume the infection will go away by itself.

"A lot of people try over-the-counter medication first, which, if it's a minor case, is OK," Dr. Fine says. "But if you're not getting anywhere after a couple of weeks or you see that it's getting worse, then it's worth getting it checked out. **There's a fine line between jumping the gun and sitting on it too long** and letting it get worse."

An important part of the treatment is not only to deal with your feet, but also your environment. "When you treat a fungus, you have to not only treat the feet, but you have to look at the shower and the shoes," Dr. Fine says. "Fungus is everywhere – you're exposed to it all the time."

So, clean the shower with Lysol and bleach. Wear flip flops in the shower even at home once there's been an infection. If one person in the house has the infection, it's all too easy to pass it along.

"When athlete's foot gets bad, it's usually not because the over-the-counter stuff isn't working," Dr. Eriksen says. "It's usually because people haven't been treating it at all and it's allowed to get worse." e

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