

Tinea



TINEA: THE FACTS

Tinea is a fungal infection that can affect the entire body. It is estimated that tinea affects 70% of people at some point in their lives. Sometimes referred to as ringworm because the rash forms a red ring on the skin, tinea is a common condition in hot and humid climates, and so it particularly affects people throughout the warmer regions of Australia. Different names are given to tinea as it affects the skin (tinea versicolor), hair (tinea capitis) and nails (tinea unguium), and in different locations on the body. When it affects the feet, tinea most often shows up as tinea pedis, better known as athlete's foot.

Sweaty feet are ideal breeding grounds for fungal infections, making athletes a good target for the condition. Athlete's foot usually affects the skin between the toes and the sole of the foot, and will be red and itchy. The skin between the toes may become dry and cracked or scaly, and in extreme cases, blisters can form on the sensitive skin. In warm and humid parts of Australia, feet sweat more than they might in cooler climates, and so athlete's foot affects athletes and the general population alike.

If left untreated, athlete's foot can lead to tinea on the toenails, which will usually make the nails appear thick, discoloured, and they will become crumbly and breakable. If a tinea infection of the nails isn't treated, it can cause the nail to separate from the nail bed and ultimately fall off. It can take a long time for the nail bed to recover and for the nail to grow back, and the exposed nail bed can be uncomfortable.

Fungal infections are spread by contact. If you touch the infected skin of someone who has tinea, or a surface that an infected person has been in contact with, you will be at risk of getting the infection. Sports changing rooms are one of the main breeding grounds for tinea as the flooring is often wet and people walk around with bare feet. The moisture on the floor carries infected patches of skin from one foot to the next.

TREATING TINEA

Tinea can go by unnoticed and will often clear up on its own. In healthy individuals, the cells that make up the skin, hair and nails regenerate quickly and promote new growth and repair. If tinea develops into a noticeable rash, often accompanied by an itch, most patients want treatment for the discomfort. Athlete's foot can be treated effectively using over-the-counter antifungal creams and powders that prevent itching and treat the fungal rash. For tinea of the nails an oral medication is usually prescribed in tablet form.

Always get any infection checked by a medical professional — a podiatrist, dermatologist or a doctor — before buying remedies, as different infections require

different treatments. Tinea can be confused with dermatitis and other fungal infections, so it's important to check that you're getting the right treatment for your condition. A physician will usually be able to diagnose your rash just by looking at it and they may take a scraping of skin or nail to examine under the microscope. Either way, you should get a definite diagnosis immediately so that you can get started on treatment straight away. In very severe cases, samples of skin or nail are sent off to an external lab to fully study the type of fungus by growing it in a test tube, but as fungus is slow growing, this step is only used for very serious cases that aren't responding to treatment. If you have tinea on one part of your body it is highly likely that it has spread to another area as well, such as the hands, or in male athletes, the groin. Treating all affected areas at the same time is the best way to ensure a speedy recovery; otherwise the infection can continue to be passed from an un-medicated to a medicated area of the body. Allow feet to breathe and give the skin and nails time to heal. Avoid wearing nail varnish so that oxygen can get to the nails and help them to heal faster.

Antifungal treatments aren't usually recommended during pregnancy or may not mix well with other medications you are taking. Always ask your physician before taking any new medication. If you are looking for a safe home remedy to treat tinea, try mixing one part vinegar with four parts water and soaking your feet in the mixture. Be sure to dry your feet carefully afterwards and apply talcum powder between the toes to absorb moisture in hard-to-reach areas.

Tinea is generally a very manageable infection that will often go away of its own accord or with conservative treatment. For people with lowered immune systems, such as those with diabetes, HIV, or people taking antibiotics, it may be more difficult to fight off infection, and so symptoms may be prolonged, but it is unlikely that tinea will cause any serious complications.

TEN TIPS FOR THE PREVENTION OF TINEA

1. Tinea loves warm, moist conditions, so keep your feet clean and dry them carefully, being sure to fully dry in between the toes. Talcum powder can be useful to absorb excess moisture.
2. Wear thongs or rubber shoes in changing rooms and around the pool to avoid direct contact between your skin and infected surfaces, particularly in areas that are wet as fungi grows best in moist areas.
3. Sleep without socks to allow the feet to breathe and to prevent the build up of moisture.
4. Never share sports shoes or socks, or share towels in the changing room. Shared equipment is a fast route to infection. Wash your own gear in hot water regularly and make sure that you are using clean socks every day.
5. Throw away old sneakers and athletic shoes. Old shoes can harbour fungi and bacteria and are a common cause of a variety of infections.
6. Get treatment for athlete's foot as soon as it appears to avoid spread of the infection to the toenails.
7. Use an antifungal powder in sports shoes to prevent the growth of tinea.
8. Take your pet to the vet and ask them to check for tinea. It's common to get infections from pets, and if the animal isn't treated, you are likely to get the infection again.
9. Avoid wearing nail varnish so that oxygen can get to the nail; varnish can help a fungal infection to spread underneath the nail as air can't penetrate the varnish.
10. If you are suffering from tinea, be extra careful to keep your feet covered in communal changing rooms so as not to pass the infection on to others.

