

Athletes Foot: Advice Sheet

What is Athletes Foot?

Athlete's foot is caused by a fungus called *tinea pedis*. This stealthy intruder, which targets the nails, skin and hair, causes skin to redden, crack, burn, scale and itch. When the fungus invades the area between the toes, the classic symptoms are itchy, flaking skin. Sometimes *tinea* stays between the toes, but it may also appear on the soles and sides of the feet and even spread to the toenails. Severe cases of athlete's foot can be accompanied by oozing blisters. Warm damp floors are a common breeding ground for *tinea*, but it loves any warm, moist places. So the feet, often confined in sweaty shoes and socks, make an ideal breeding ground!

What does Athletes Foot look like?

Most cases of athlete's foot are barely noticeable with just slightly dry, flaky skin localized to just the bottoms of the feet. The space between the fourth and fifth toes also may have some moisture, peeling, and/or dry flakes with or without blisters. More extensive athlete's foot may look like red, peeling, dry skin areas on one or both soles, or may even spread onto the sides and tops of the feet as well as between the other toes of the feet.

A "two feet and one hand" presentation is very common for athlete's foot, especially in men. The exact cause of why the infection commonly (but not always) only affects one hand is not known.

Athlete's foot may also be seen along with ringworm of the groin (again more commonly in men) or hand/s so it is helpful to examine the feet whenever there is a fungal infection elsewhere on the body.

What are the treatments for Athlete Foot?

The treatment of athlete's foot can be divided into two parts. The first, and most important part, is to make the infected area less suitable for the athlete's foot fungus to survive in. This means keeping the area clean and dry. Buy shoes that are leather or another breathable material. Occlusive shoe materials, such as vinyl, cause the feet to remain moist, providing an excellent arena for the fungus to breed in. Likewise, absorbent socks like cotton that wick water away from your feet may help. Powders, especially medicated powders can help keep your feet dry, or you can soak your feet in a drying solution. A homemade remedy of dilute white vinegar soaks using one part vinegar and roughly four parts water, once or twice a day as 10-minute foot soaks may aid in treatment.

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The second part of treatment is the use of antifungal creams and washes. Many medications are available, so ask your health-care professional or pharmacist for a recommendation. Treatment for athlete's foot should generally be continued for four weeks or at the very least one week after all of the skin symptoms have cleared up. As long as the area is not blistered or cracked, remove flakes of dead skin with a soft brush before using a topical powder or ointment. Do not tear off flaking skin; you may break nearby healthy skin and spread the infection. If the fungal infection has spread to the toenails, the nails must also be treated to avoid reinfection of the feet. If not treated properly and promptly, the infection can be very stubborn. Even when treated with antifungal medicines, the infection may take some weeks to disappear and may come back after treatment. More advanced or resistant cases of athlete's foot may require a course of an oral antifungal but this will be decided by your GP so ask for their opinion.

Can Athletes Foot be prevented? - YES!

- After a bath or shower, dry your feet thoroughly. You could also try using a hair dryer on a low setting particularly between your toes.
- Wear clean cotton socks. Natural fibres absorb moisture best. If your feet sweat a lot, then change your socks two or three times during the day to keep your feet sweat-free.
- Wash your sock in very hot water (the 60° setting) to kill any fungal spores.
- Wear shoes made of canvas or leather, which allow your feet to breathe, and avoid rubber and plastic, which hold moisture in and can cause feet to sweat.
- Don't wear the same shoes two days in a row. It takes at least a day for shoes to dry out. If your feet sweat heavily, change your shoes twice a day where possible.
- Dust the insides of your shoes with antifungal powder or spray. To kill fungus spores, spray some disinfectant on a cloth and wipe out the insides of your shoes after you take them off.
- Wear flip-flops in places where other people go barefoot, such as gyms, health clubs, changing rooms and around swimming pools.
- If your toenails are thick, yellow, crumbly and brittle, you probably have a fungal nail infection. Get rid of the toenail fungus with either an over-the-counter antifungal medication or a visit to your GP or foot health practitioner. This will help reduce your chances of getting athlete's foot.

What happens if I leave it untreated?

Untreated, athlete's foot can potentially spread to other body parts, such as legs, toenails, hands and groin or other people, including family members.

The longer it is left to develop and spread, the longer it will take to get rid of!

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