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Fungal Toenails

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What are fungal toenails?

Fungal toenail is a foot condition that accounts for about 50 percent of all toenail problems in our country. It commonly occurs among people who suffer from diabetes, arthritis, cancer and psoriasis. For other people, heredity causes fungal toenail.

What causes fungal toenails?

This condition develops when fungus invades a toenail and possibly the skin under the nail bed. Symptoms include yellow streaks in the nail bed and on the underside of the nail; buildup of skin and nail fragments under the nail; and a brittle, broken and thickened nail.

What are the symptoms of fungal toenails?

While many people consider fungal toenail a nuisance or cosmetic problem, it can lead to other health problems, such as a bacterial infection, if untreated. Symptoms of a bacterial infection include increased pain, swelling, redness, tenderness or heat; red streaks extending from the area; discharge of pus; fever of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or higher with no other cause. If you notice these symptoms, call your doctor immediately.

Fungal toenail can have severe health implications for people with diabetes, vascular conditions or those with autoimmune-related diseases. These people need to see a podiatrist immediately to treat a fungal toenail.

Treatment for fungal toenails

Treatment includes oral medication and topical agents, such as creams, lotions and gels. Doctors typically prescribe antifungal oral medication, such as terbinafine, commonly known as Lamisil, for stubborn cases because it's more effective than topical medicine. Research has proven that terbinafine kills the fungus and prevents the infection from reoccurring 72 percent of the time.

While most patients have no side effects with oral medication, a doctor may want to monitor a patient's liver function through simple blood testing. Before starting the medication, a blood test establishes a baseline of the patient's liver. Then six weeks after taking the medicine, the liver is monitored through a blood test, which is compared to the baseline. If any abnormalities appear the medication is discontinued and the liver completely recovers. This test and comparison repeats again when the treatment ends.

When all else fails, the fungal toenail can be permanently removed. This procedure is not difficult to perform and most patients return to their normal shoes in just a Band-Aid within 24 hours. The removal of the nail is permanent.

Preventing fungal toenails

The best way to prevent fungal toenails is to keep your feet dry because warm, dark and humid environments encourage fungal growth. Also, wear shower sandals when using a public shower or pool and never share shoes, socks, nail clippers or nail files. Untreated cases of fungal toenail can lead to quality of life issues that may affect your ability to work and walk, so be vigilant with treatment.

If you have additional questions regarding prevention of fungal toenail or to find out which treatment is best for you, consult your doctor or visit the American Podiatric Medical Association's web site at apma.org. American Podiatric Medical Association's web site at apma.org.

Disclaimer: This information is not a substitute for medical advice. All content is for general informational purposes only. The content is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

For more information, call Dr. Greenblott: (978) 556-9700.

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