

Athlete's Foot (Tinea Pedis)

Athlete's foot is a skin infection caused by a fungus. Treatment with an antifungal cream usually works well. The tips given below may help to prevent recurrences.

Who gets athlete's foot and how do you get it?

Athlete's foot is a common fungal infection of the skin on the feet. Some types of fungus germs (fungi) are commonly found on human skin. They usually do no harm. However, if conditions are right they can 'invade' the skin, multiply, and cause infection. The conditions fungi like best are warm, moist and airless areas of skin such as between the toes.

Anyone can get athlete's foot. Athlete's foot can also be passed on from person to person. For example, this may occur in communal showers used by athletes or swimmers. A tiny flake of infected skin from a person with athlete's foot can fall off whilst showering. It may then be trodden on by others who can then develop the infection. Once a small patch of infection develops it typically spreads along the skin.

What are the symptoms of athlete's foot?

The skin between the little toes tends to be affected at first. A rash develops that becomes itchy and scaly. The skin may become cracked and sore. Tiny flakes of infected skin may fall off. The rash may spread gradually along the toes if left untreated. In some cases it spreads to the soles.

Is athlete's foot serious?

Usually not. Most people treat their itchy toes before it spreads. Sometimes the infection spreads to the skin on other parts of the body. These are usually the moist and airless parts of the skin such as the groin. Fungi do not usually go deeper than the skin into the body. However, other germs (bacteria) may enter through the cracked skin of untreated athlete's foot. This can occasionally cause more serious infections of the foot or leg (such as cellulitis of the leg).

The infection sometimes spreads to a nail. This can be treated. However, it takes several weeks of antifungal tablets to clear the infection from a nail. Therefore, it is best to treat athlete's foot as soon as symptoms start.

What is the treatment for athlete's foot?

You can buy an antifungal cream from pharmacies, or get one on prescription. There are various types and brands. For example; terbinafine, clotrimazole, econazole, ketoconazole, miconazole, and sulconazole. These modern creams are good at clearing fungal skin infections.

- Apply the cream to the surrounding 4-6 cm of normal skin in addition to the rash.
- Apply for as long as advised. This varies between the different creams, so read the instructions carefully. Although the rash may seem to go quite quickly, you still need to apply the cream for 1-2 weeks after the rash has gone. This is to completely clear the fungi from the skin which will prevent the rash from returning.

An antifungal tablet is sometimes prescribed if the infection does not clear with a cream, or if the infection is severe, or if the infection is in many places on the skin in addition to the toes.

You do not need to stay away from work, school or sports. However, try to keep your feet covered in communal changing areas until the rash is gone. Also, try not to scratch the affected skin, as this may spread infection to other sites.

The following tips may prevent athlete's foot recurring

- Wash your feet and toes daily.
- Dry the skin between your toes thoroughly after washing. This is perhaps the most important point. It is tempting to put socks on when your feet are not quite dry. The soggy skin between the toes is then ideal for fungi to grow.
- Do not share towels in communal changing rooms. Wash towels frequently.
- Change your socks daily. Fungi may multiply in flakes of skin in unwashed socks. Cotton socks and leather footwear are probably better than nylon socks and plastic footwear which increase sweating.
- Ideally, alternate between different shoes every 2-3 days to allow each pair to dry out fully after being worn.
- Ideally, wear flip-flops or plastic sandals in communal changing rooms and showers. This prevents the soles of your feet coming in contact with the ground which may contain flakes of skin from other people.
- Ideally, when at home leave your shoes and socks off as much as possible to let the air get to your feet. However, this may not be practical for some people.

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