



How to Know if You Have Nail Fungus

Expert
Reviewed

Two Parts: [Identifying Nail Fungus](#) [Treating Nail Fungus](#)

Nail fungus, also known as onychomycosis or tinea unguium, is a common condition that can affect either the finger — or toenails, though it is more likely to infect toenails.^[1] It often begins as a white or yellow spot under your nail(s) and can cause serious damage to the nail(s) or other infections if left untreated.^[2] By identifying the signs and symptoms and treating the condition, you can not only know if you have nail fungus, but also get rid of this potentially unsightly condition.

Part
1

Identifying Nail Fungus

1 Learn the causes. Nail fungus is most often caused by a dermatophyte fungus, but the infection can also stem from yeasts and molds on your nail.^[3] The fungi, yeasts, or molds that cause nail fungus can infect you and thrive under the following conditions:

- Invisible cuts on your skin or a small separation of your nail bed
- Warm, moist environments that can include swimming pools, showers, and even your shoes.^[4]

2 Be aware of your risk factors. Although any person can get nail fungus, certain factors can make you more prone to developing it.^[5] Your risk may be at a higher risk because of:^[6]

- Age, which can reduce blood flow and slow nail growth
- Gender, especially men with a family history of nail fungus infections
- Location, in particular if you work in a humid or moist environment or if your hands or feet are often wet
- Heavy perspiration
- Clothing choices, such as wearing socks and shoes that don't allow proper ventilation and/ or absorb perspiration
- Proximity to someone who has nail fungus, especially if you live with an infected person
- Having athlete's foot
- Having a minor skin or nail injury or skin condition like psoriasis
- Having diabetes, circulation problems, or a weakened immune system

3 Recognize the symptoms. Nail infections exhibit some typical symptoms that can help you quickly know if you have the condition. Nails infected with fungi, yeast, or molds may be:^[7]

- Thickened
- White or discolored, with or without speckles of white in the nail bed
- Brittle, crumbly, or ragged
- Distorted in shape
- Dull and lacking any shine
- Dark in color, which is a result of debris build-up under the nail
- Nail fungus can also cause the nail to separate from the nail bed

4 Observe changes to your nail. Pay close attention to your nails to notice if any changes occur to them over time. This can help you more easily know if you have nail fungus and get timely treatment.^[8]

- Notice white and yellow patches or streaks under and on the sides of the nail, which is one of the first signs you may notice.^[9]
- Look for changes to the texture of your nail such as brittleness, thickening, or loss of lustre.^[10]
- Remove nail polish at least once a week so that you can check your nails. Polish may make it difficult to effectively recognize nail fungus symptoms.

5 Notice pain. More advanced cases of nail fungus may cause pain and possibly inflammation to your nails and surrounding tissues.^[11] Thickened nails may accompany pain, making it easier to know if you have a nail fungus as opposed to an ingrown toenail or another condition.^[12] You may experience pain while walking or wearing shoes if you have an infected toenail.

- Feel for pain directly on your nail or around it. You may want to gently press on your nail to see if you have any pain.
- Make sure the pain isn't a result of too tight shoes, which can cause pain in your toenails.

6 Detect odor. Dead or dying tissues build up under your nail(s) or nail separation can cause your nails to give off an odor.^[13] Detecting any unusual odor may help you figure out if you have nail fungus and get proper treatment.^[14]

- Smell for a particularly foul odor that may resemble something dead or decaying.^[15]

7 See your doctor. If you are exhibiting symptoms of nail fungus and aren't sure of the cause or self-help measures aren't working for suspected nail fungus, schedule an appointment with your doctor.^[16] Your doctor can examine your toes and possibly run tests to confirm the type of infection you have, which can help her formulate the best treatment for you.^[17]

- Tell your doctor how long you've had symptoms and explain any pain and odor you may also have.
- Let your doctor examine your nails, which may be the only type of test she needs to confirm nail fungus.^[18]
- Your doctor may scrape some debris from under your nail and send it for further testing to determine what is causing your infection.^[19]
- Be aware that some conditions like psoriasis can present like fungal infections of the nail.^[20]

Part 2

Treating Nail Fungus

1 Take oral antifungal medications. Often topical therapies can't fully eradicate fungus and you will need an oral antifungal medication to get rid of the infection. These drugs, including terbinafine (Lamisil) and itraconazole (Sporanox) can help a new, infection-free nail grow, replacing the areas with nail fungus.^[21]

- Take this treatment for six to 12 weeks. Be aware that it may take four months or longer to kill the infection.^[22]
- Understand you may have side effects including skin rash and liver damage. Speak to your doctor about other medical conditions before taking oral antifungals.^[23]

2 Trim and thin your nails. Cutting your nails and thinning them out can help relieve pain and pressure on your nails and nail beds.^[24] This can also help any treatment more easily penetrate and heal the infection.^[25]

- Soften nails before trimming or thinning them. You can do this by applying urea cream to the affected nails and covering it with a bandage and then washing off the product in the morning. Use this procedure until the nails soften.^[26]
- Protect the area around your nail with petroleum jelly.^[27]

3 Apply Vicks VapoRub. Some studies have found that rubbing Vicks VapoRub on nail fungus may help treat it.^[28] Apply a thin layer of the product every day to help kill nail fungus.^[29]

- Use a cotton swab to apply the VapoRub to your nail.^[30]
- Put the product on at night and leave it on overnight. Wipe it off in the morning.
- Repeat the process until the infection subsides.

4 Try herbal remedies. There is some evidence that alternative herbal remedies may help treat nail fungal infections.^[31] Two herbal remedies that may kill nail fungus and keep it at bay are:^[32]

- Snakeroot extract, which comes from the sunflower family. Apply every third day for one month, twice a week the following month, and once a week for a third month.

- Tea tree oil. Apply twice a day until the fungus disappears.^[33]

5 Use creams and ointments. If you notice white or yellow markings or patches on your nails, apply an over-the-counter or prescription nail cream or ointment. For more severe cases, have your doctor prescribe a medicated cream.^[34] This may help nip the infection in the bud before it spreads or gets more serious.^[35]

- File off the surface of the nail, soak the affected area in water and dry it before applying the treatment.^[36]
- Follow packaging and doctor's instructions to most effectively kill the infection.

6 Paint your nails with medicated polish. Your doctor may suggest applying a medicated polish to your affected nails.^[37] This can help kill the infection and prevent fungus from spreading.^[38] This must be done consistently for months to have any effect.

- Apply ciclopirox (Penlac) to your nails once a day for a week and then remove and repeat the polish.^[39]
- It may take a year of this type of treatment to control the fungus.^[40]

7 Consider other procedures. Severe fungal infections may require more invasive treatments. Speak to your doctor about other procedures such as nail removal or laser therapies to help kill your nail fungus.^[41]

- Your doctor may want to remove your nail if the fungus is particularly severe. In this case, a new nail may grow back within a year.^[42]
- Some studies have shown that laser and light-based therapies can help treat nail fungus, either alone or in conjunction with other medication.^[43] Be aware that these therapies may not be covered by insurance and are expensive.^[44]

8 Prevent nail fungus. You can help prevent the spread or re-infection by nail fungus if you take prophylactic steps to minimize risk of the condition. Adopting the following habits can help minimize your risk for nail fungus:^[45]

- Keep hands and feet clean and nails short and dry
- Wear absorbent socks
- Wear shoes that promote ventilation
- Get rid of old shoes
- Apply antifungal spray or powder inside of shoes
- Avoid picking skin around the nails
- Wear shoes in public spaces
- Remove nail polish and artificial nails
- Wash your hands and feet after touching an infected nail

Community Q&A

Could a black and blue toe be caused by long-term use of dark nail polish?



Yes, if you don't use a base coat before applying dark nail polish it might dye the nail. However, only the surface of the nail should be stained. Check with your doctor if you're uncertain.

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Tips

- Start treatment as soon as you are able. Nail fungus may spread if left untreated.

Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/nail-fungus/basics/definition/con-20019319>
2. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/nail-fungus/basics/definition/con-20019319>

3. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/nail-fungus/basics/definition/con-20019319>

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