

## Fungal infections

Fungi are a type of germ – they are all around us and don't usually cause any problems. Sometimes they can cause infections in the skin, hair and nails, which are treated with creams or tablets.

Occasionally fungi (which is the plural of fungus) can cause more serious infections, particularly if you are already ill. This can happen if you are taking medicines that cause you to have a weakened immune system, such as chemotherapy or some medications used to treat inflammatory conditions – this will put you at a higher risk of a fungal infection.

## What are fungal infections?

### What is a fungus?

A fungus is just a type of germ. They can range from tiny, invisible specks that float around in the air, all the way up to large growths like mushrooms. Fungi (the plural of fungus) are all around us and don't usually cause any problems.

However occasionally they can settle down and grow in places where they shouldn't: places on our bodies like our skin, nails, between our toes and, in women, the vagina and vulva.. This can happen even in people who are fairly healthy and is usually easy to treat with creams or pills.

Occasionally if someone's immune system is weak because they are battling cancer or on chemotherapy, fungi can grow in their lungs or elsewhere in the body. This then needs specialist treatment with strong antifungal medications either by pills or by infusions into a vein. [See the separate leaflet called Fungal Lung Infections.](#)

## Types of fungal infections

Common types of fungal infections include:

## **Athlete's foot (tinea pedis)**

is a condition in which fungi grow in between your toes, making the skin itchy and sore. It can be treated with a variety of creams which can be bought over the counter. You should generally go to see a pharmacist about this rather than to your GP, though people who have diabetes may need more medical input. [See the separate leaflet called Athlete's Foot \(Tinea Pedis\)](#).

## **Fungal groin infection (also known as jock itch)**

Some people develop an itchy fungal infection in the skin at the top of their thighs (what doctors call the groin creases) or under the breasts. This usually goes away with an antifungal cream like [miconazole](#). [See the separate leaflet called Fungal Groin Infection \(Tinea Cruris\)](#).

## **Ringworm**

Most people will get something called ringworm at some point. This is a dry, slightly red circle of itchy skin usually on your leg or arm, or occasionally the scalp. It usually goes away with an antifungal cream. The classic appearance of ringworm is a scaly circle which clears from the centre, leaving the appearance of a ring.. [See the separate leaflets called Ringworm \(Tinea Corporis\) and Fungal Scalp Infection \(Scalp Ringworm\)](#).

## **Yeast infection**

A fairly common condition, a vaginal yeast infection happens when fungus called *Candida albicans* grows in a woman's vagina, causes an itchy sensation and usually some vaginal discharge. This is called vaginal thrush and has a number of treatments ranging from a cream or a tablet to changes to your diet. Treatments can be bought over the counter. Thrush can sometimes happen as a side-effect of antibiotic use. [See the separate leaflet called Vaginal Thrush \(Yeast Infection\)](#).

## **Fungal nail infections**

It is quite common to develop a fungal nail infection on the toenails. The symptoms of fungal nail infections are:

- Nails turning white.
- Nails becoming flaky and brittle.
- Nails growing into a curved-over shape instead of being fairly flat.

Treatment for this might include a paint or lotion to put on the nails, or a prescribed tablet – prescribed tablets can cause problems with the liver and so the need for treatment should be carefully discussed, as mostly fungal nail infections only cause cosmetic problems rather than pain or long-term harm. Your GP will usually want to prove the infection by sending off a sample of the nail to the laboratory, before prescribing a tablet. [See the separate leaflet called Fungal Nail Infections \(Tinea Unguium\)](#).

### **Where else in the body can fungi cause problems?**

Occasionally fungi can grow in someone's ear canal, if they do a lot of swimming or diving or live in a humid environment. Sometimes fungi can grow in someone's lungs. This is serious and is usually related to the person already having a weak immune system, such as having cancer or receiving chemotherapy.

There is a rare condition called aspergillosis where a fungus causes an allergic reaction in your lungs and causes problems with breathing. This requires a specialist to diagnose and treat it. [See the separate leaflet called Fungal Lung Infections](#).

## **Symptoms of fungal infections**

The thing that is common to fungal skin infections is that the affected area tends to be itchy rather than painful and often makes the skin a bit flaky. They are not contagious: you can't catch it by touching the other person's skin. Although they are annoying and irritating, they are not usually serious.

## **Treatment of fungal infections**

As already discussed, these are usually treated by a cream used in the affected area, but occasionally a tablet is used. Most of the time it is reasonable to consult a pharmacist in the first instance as they can often sort out treatment without you needing to see your GP and get a prescription medication.

# How to prevent fungal infections

Fungal infections often happen in warm, wet areas of the body so making sure that you dry the relevant area thoroughly after a bath or after swimming is important, and generally keep areas such as between the toes and under the breasts clean and dry. Some women will find that avoiding perfumed soaps or bubble baths will help to reduce their risk of getting vaginal thrush.

## Can yeast candida invade my body?

Like a lot of things in medicine, there are plenty of myths around fungi. Something that's caught hold in the last decade or so is the idea of having the fungus called candida floating around in your bloodstream, infecting your whole body. This is then blamed for common problems like irritability, fatigue, indigestion, headaches and sleep problems.

There is no proof that 'systemic candida' (as it's called) really exists, with the exception of some very unwell people whose immune system does not function properly and who may end up seriously ill and admitted to hospital. It is advisable to avoid buying any treatments for 'systemic candida' and to speak to a qualified and registered doctor about your concerns before spending any money.

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## Further reading

- [Tinea Capitis](#); British Association of Dermatologists, 2017
- [Fungal infections of the nails](#); British Association of Dermatologists, 2017

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