Fungal Nail Infections:

Causes, Symptoms & Treatments

Evexia Foot Care
Expert Care for Every Step

📋 Overview

Fungal nail infection (also known as **onychomycosis**) is a very common condition that makes nails discoloured, thickened, and brittle. It most often affects toenails — particularly the big toe — but can also occur in fingernails. It is usually not painful in the early stages but can become uncomfortable and spread if left untreated.

🦠 Causes & How It Spreads

What causes it?

Fungal nail infections are caused by various types of fungi — most commonly **dermatophytes**, but also yeasts and moulds. These organisms thrive in warm, damp, and dark environments.

How you can catch it:

- **Walking barefoot** in damp public places — swimming pools, gym changing rooms, showers, saunas
- **Sharing towels, socks, shoes or nail clippers** with someone who has a fungal infection
- **Injury to the nail** — a crack or damage lets fungi get underneath
- **Coming from athlete's foot** — the fungus can spread from the skin to the nails

Risk factors that make you more likely to get it:

Table

Factor	Why it matters
Age over 50	Nails grow more slowly and become thicker and more brittle
Diabetes & poor circulation	Reduced blood flow to the feet impairs natural defence and healing
Sweaty feet / tight footwear	Creates ideal warm, moist conditions for fungi to grow
Previous nail injury	Breaks the protective barrier
Weakened immune system	Less able to fight off infection
Athlete's foot	Fungus already present on the skin

🔍 Signs & Symptoms

- ✅ **Discolouration** — nail turns white, yellow, brown, or grey
- ✅ **Thickening** — nail becomes thicker and harder to trim
- ✅ **Brittleness** — nail crumbles, flakes, or splits at the edges
- ✅ **Distorted shape** — nail may lift away from the nail bed
- ✅ **Debris under the nail** — white/yellow material builds up beneath the nail
- ✅ **Slight odour** — in some cases, a faint unpleasant smell
- ⚠️ **Pain** — usually only in advanced stages or when wearing shoes

💊 Treatment Options

🟢 Self-Care & Home Management

Table

Action	Guidance
Keep nails short & clean	Trim straight across; file down thickened areas. Wash and dry feet thoroughly, especially between toes
Change socks daily	Wear moisture-wicking or cotton socks; avoid synthetic materials that trap sweat
Don't go barefoot in shared areas	Wear flip-flops/slides in communal showers, pools, and changing rooms
Disinfect nail clippers	Clean tools after use; don't share them with others
Over-the-counter antifungals	Creams, sprays, or nail lacquers may help mild infections. Always complete the full course

⏳ **Patience is key:** Nails grow slowly — toenails take up to **12 months** to fully grow out. Even with successful treatment, the damaged nail must grow out completely for clear results.

🟡 Professional Treatments

If self-care doesn't work or the infection is severe, see a foot health practitioner, podiatrist or GP:

Treatment	What it involves	Notes
Prescription topical medication	Stronger medicated nail paints or creams applied directly	Applied once or twice weekly; works best on mild-to-moderate infections
Oral antifungal tablets	Taken daily for 6–12 weeks	More effective but may have side effects; GP will check suitability and sometimes monitor liver function

Professional nail debridement	FHP/Podiatrist safely reduces thickened nail and removes infected material	Improves penetration of topical treatments and reduces discomfort
Laser treatment	Uses targeted light energy to destroy fungus	Available privately; multiple sessions needed; not guaranteed to cure

🔴 Surgical Removal

Only considered in severe, painful, or recurring cases that don't respond to other treatments. The nail (or part of it) may be removed permanently under local anaesthetic.

🛡️ Prevention Tips

- ✅ Dry feet completely after bathing — especially between toes
- ✅ Wear breathable, well-fitted shoes; alternate pairs daily so they dry out
- ✅ Don't share shoes, socks, towels, or nail tools
- ✅ Wear flip-flops in public wet areas
- ✅ Treat athlete's foot promptly — don't let it spread to nails
- ✅ Keep nails trimmed and clean
- ✅ Check your feet regularly — the earlier you spot it, the easier it is to treat

⚠️ When to See a GP or Podiatrist

Seek professional help if:

- Infection appears suddenly or is spreading quickly
- Nail is painful, red, hot, or swollen (signs of secondary bacterial infection)
- You have **diabetes** or poor circulation — do not attempt self-treatment without advice
- You notice signs of infection spreading to the surrounding skin
- The infection affects multiple nails or keeps coming back

Disclaimer: This fact sheet is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical or podiatric advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your GP or qualified healthcare provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

Source: Based on guidance from the Royal College of Podiatry and NHS clinical guidelines.