

Athlete's Foot (Tinea Pedis)

Athlete's foot is an infection of the foot with certain types of fungi called dermatophytes. The infection causes itching, tenderness, and foot odor. Medications can be used to kill the fungus, though treatment may need to be continued for several weeks.

What is athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot is a common foot infection caused by infection with certain types of fungi, called dermatophytes—these are the same fungi that cause ringworm and jock itch. Dermatophytes grow best in moist, damp places, which is why infection commonly spreads in the shower areas of gyms and swimming pools.

Active people who wear tight, thick socks and heavy shoes are at increased risk of getting this infection, especially in hot weather. Athlete's foot is more common in teens than in younger children.

What does it look like?

- The feet become itchy and tender, especially in the spaces between the toes. One or both feet may be affected.
- Peeling and cracking of the skin occur between and under the toes and on soles of the feet. Unpleasant foot odor may occur.
- Sometimes, especially in younger children, blisters and pustules (pimples) develop.
- If the infection is present for a long time, the bottom of the foot may become thickened and scaly.

What are some possible complications of athlete's foot?

- Even with treatment, the infection may be difficult to eliminate completely or may come back frequently.

- The infection may spread to other areas, especially the toenails.

Can athlete's foot be prevented?

It's a good idea to wear shower shoes or sandals in public showers and locker rooms, rather than going barefoot.

How is athlete's foot diagnosed?

The doctor may recognize athlete's foot from the appearance of the infection. Other conditions, such as eczema or irritation from some type of material in the shoes (contact dermatitis), may look like athlete's foot.

To be sure of the diagnosis, the doctor may collect a sample by scraping the infected area. He or she can then look at the sample under the microscope to see if fungus is present or may send it for culture. If culture is performed, it may take a week or longer to get the results.

How is athlete's foot treated?

- It is important to keep the feet clean and dry.
- For mild cases, a topical (placed on the skin) antifungal powder or cream may be effective—for example, Desenex or Tinactin. Your doctor may recommend a prescription antifungal cream. Apply the medication to the foot for at least a few weeks.
- The infection can return quickly and can be hard to control with just topical medications. Some patients may need to take oral antifungal medications plus a longer period of treatment with topical medications.
- Athlete's foot sometimes becomes a chronic or frequent problem. Treatment may need to be repeated.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if the infection doesn't clear up or if it returns after treatment.