

Weekend Doctor

By **DR. THOMAS F. VAIL**

With warm weather approaching and sandal season 'kicking' in, you want your toenails to look their best. Now is the perfect time to take off nail polish and see how your toenails have weathered through the long winter months.

If you notice yellow or cracking of your nails, you may have a fungal infection.

But don't worry. Caught early, toenail fungus can be treated successfully with the latest advancements, including FDA-approved laser therapy and physician formula topicals.

A fungus infection of the toenail, also known as onychomycosis, is one of the most common dermatologic disorders affecting the foot. Whereas ringworm is a dermatophyte fungal infection of the skin, onychomycosis is a dermatophyte fungus infection of the nail.

The disease is characterized by a thickening of the toenail plate, debris under the toenail, a lifting of the leading edge of the nail, a change in nail color and, occasionally, an odor.

Patients complain that toenail fungus is ugly and embarrassing. This condition is often ignored because the infection can be present for years without causing any pain.

If ignored, the infection can spread to other toenails, the skin on the feet and even the fingernails.

Severe cases can impair one's ability to walk or lead to painful ingrown toenails. Secondary bacterial infections may occur on or around the toenail plate.

Contributing factors for developing nail fungus infection include:

- A history of athlete's foot;
- Injury to the nail bed;
- Sports/shoe trauma;
- Excessive perspiration;
- Diabetes;
- Circulatory problems and
- Immune-deficiency conditions.

The best offense is a good defense. Prevention is key to avoiding fungal infection.

Prevention tips include:

- Proper hygiene; washing the feet with soap and water;
- Dry thoroughly; use powder as a drying agent;
- Daily inspection of the feet and toes;
- Shower shoes should be worn when possible in public areas;
- Wear shoes that are breathable;
- Bring your own instruments/nail polish to a pedicurist and
- Use anti-fungal nail polishes at all times.

Historically, treatments for fungal nails included topical medications, pills or surgical removal of the nail plate.

The topical medications were largely ineffective because the active ingredient didn't penetrate the nail. Now, topicals have delivery agents that are better able to absorb through the nail.

Pills have been known to affect the liver and blood tests are needed to monitor the body and prevent damage. Removal of the nail plate was painful and debilitating.

Now, new dual wavelength lasers can treat fungal nails easily, effectively and without the risk of side-effects from oral medication. Speak to your podiatrist about new laser therapy that could get you back to the beach barefoot without embarrassing toenails.



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