

Fungal Infections of the Hair, Skin or Nails (Ringworm, Tinea, Athlete's Foot)

These infections are commonly called 'ringworm', but are not caused by worms. They are superficial infections of the skin, hair or nails caused by a variety of fungi which otherwise live in the soil, on animals, or sometimes only on people.

Often these infections are localised to specific parts of the body:

- > Scalp and beard (colour plate no. 5)
 - begins as a small pimple which spreads outwards, leaving a scaly hairless patch. Infected hairs become brittle and break off easily.
- > Toenails and fingernails (colour plate no. 4)
 - usually involves one or more nails of the hands and feet, most often the feet. The nail gradually thickens, becomes discoloured (white or yellowish) and brittle. Cheesy material forms beneath the nail or the nail becomes chalky and disintegrates.
- > Skin (other than scalp, bearded areas and feet) (colour plate no. 15)
 - appears as a flat, spreading ring-shaped lesion. The edge is usually reddened and may be dry and scaly or moist and crusted. The centre of the patch may appear to be normal skin.
- > Foot (tinea, athlete's foot) (colour plate no. 18)
 - appears as scaling or cracking of the skin, especially between the toes. It is often very itchy.

These infections are diagnosed by clinical examination and by examining small samples of skin, hair or nail under the microscope, then by growing the fungus. Knowing which fungus is causing the infection gives information on what treatments are best and how to prevent new infections occurring. For example, if the cause is a fungus which normally lives on animals, it may be necessary to treat pets in the household. Sometimes a dog or cat can have a fungal infection which causes only mild symptoms in it, but is much more irritating in people. It is also possible for pets to get infections from their owners!

Infections are spread by direct skin contact (with humans or animals), or indirectly from contaminated articles or floors, or the soil. Shared changing rooms and showers are often a source of tinea, while some infections are spread by sharing of items such as towels. People shed tiny pieces of skin all the time and if these contain a small amount of the fungus, it is able to survive in the environment and cause infection in someone else.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

Varies with site of infection and the particular fungus.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

As long as the condition persists untreated. Some treatments will rapidly kill the fungus and prevent spread to others.

Treatment

Specific antifungal therapies (directly applied to the skin and/or taken by mouth) are available for both humans and animals. Sometimes the treatment must be continued for many months.

Control of spread

- > Children and adults with fungal hair, skin or nail infection of any site should be excluded from child care, preschool, school or work until the day after appropriate treatment has commenced.
- > Close contacts (people having household or close physical contact) should be inspected for signs of infection.
- > Follow good hand washing, laundering and keeping areas clean techniques. Vacuum floors regularly.
- > Pets can be washed with antifungal washes.

- > Hand Hygiene
- > Keeping Areas Clean