

Chilblains

Chilblains are patches of red, swollen and itchy skin, believed to be caused by a combination of cold weather and poor circulation. The toes are particularly vulnerable. Tight shoes can also contribute by irritating and pressing on the skin of the toes, especially the little toe. The elderly, sedentary and people with medical conditions (such as anaemia) are most susceptible.

Symptoms

- A burning sensation on the skin
- Red, swollen patches
- Intense itching
- Dry, split and cracked skin
- Possible secondary infection
- Ulceration, in severe cases.

Theory of a chilblain

Although the exact cause of chilblains remains unknown, it is thought to be associated with the body's reaction when a cold damp extremity is warmed rapidly. In cold weather, the blood vessels constrict to conserve body heat. This constriction can starve extremities - such as the toes - of blood and warmth. It is thought that in some people, when the cold extremity is warmed rapidly there is a vaso-spastic response which starves the extremity further. This results in cell death, followed by an inflammatory response causing burning, redness and swelling. As the area begins to heal, an itching sensation results. The area usually has a poor blood flow so healing is slow and the skin is dry and brittle.

Treating chilblains at home

- Resist the urge to scratch, as this will further damage the skin.
- Use calamine lotion, witch hazel or Friar's Balsam to soothe the itching. Your chemist may also supply a suitable product.
- Lanolin or similar, rubbed into the feet, will help retain body heat.
- Wear woollen socks or Ugg boots/slippers.
- Keep your whole body warm.

Prevention tips

Never allow your extremities to get cold.

Suggestions include:

- Avoid long periods of exposure to cold or damp weather.
- Wear several layers of clothing, which trap body heat more efficiently than one bulky layer.
- Make sure your shoes are comfortable and don't squeeze your toes.
- Dry feet thoroughly after showering or bathing.
- Avoid bare feet. Use woollen socks or Ugg boots/slippers.
- Exercise regularly to improve peripheral circulation.
- Regularly pamper and condition the skin of your feet with home pedicures.
- See a podiatrist for regular professional treatments.
- See your GP if the condition is severe