



Tinea Infections: Athlete's Foot, Jock Itch and Ringworm

What is tinea?

Tinea is caused by a fungus that grows on your skin, hair or nails. As it grows, it spreads out in a circle, leaving normal-looking skin in the middle. This makes it look like a ring. At the edge of the ring, the skin is lifted up by the irritation and looks like a red and scaly rash. To some people, the infection looks like a worm is under the skin. Because of the way it looks, tinea infection is often called "ringworm." However, there really is not a worm under the skin.

How did I get a ringworm/tinea?

You can get a fungal infection by contact with person or environment. Some fungi live on damp surfaces, like the floors of showers or locker rooms. You can even catch a fungal infection from your pets. Dogs and cats, as well as farm animals, can be infected with a fungus. Often this infection looks like a patch of skin where fur is missing (mange).

What areas of the body are affected by tinea infections?

Fungal infections are named for the part of the body they infect. Tinea corporis is a fungal infection of the skin on the body. If you have this infection, you may see small, red spots that grow into large rings almost anywhere on your arms, legs or chest.

Tinea pedis is usually called "athlete's foot." The moist skin between your toes is a perfect place for a fungus to grow. The skin may become itchy and red, with a white, wet surface. The infection may spread to the toenails. This is called tinea unguium. Here it causes the toenails to become thick and crumbly. It can also spread to your hands and fingernails.

When a fungus grows in the moist, warm areas of the groin, the rash is called tinea cruris. The common name for this infection is "jock itch." Tinea cruris generally occurs in men.

Tinea capitis, which is called "ringworm," causes itchy, red areas, usually on the head. The hair is destroyed, leaving bald patches. This tinea infection is most common in children.

How do I know if I have a fungal infection?

The best way to know for sure is to ask your health care provider. Other skin problems can look just like a fungal infection but have very different treatment. To find out what is causing your rash, your provider may scrape a small amount of the irritated skin onto a glass slide (or clip off a piece of nail or hair). Then he or she will look at the skin, nail or hair under a microscope. After doing this your provider will usually be able to tell if your skin problem is caused by a fungus. Sometimes a piece of your skin, hair or nail will be sent to a lab to grow the fungus in a test tube.

How do I get rid of a tinea infection?

Once your health care provider decides that you have a tinea infection, medicine can be used to get rid of it. You may only need to put a special cream on the rash for a few weeks. This is especially true for jock itch. Over the counter treatments work very well and are less expensive than prescriptions.

It can be hard to get rid of fungal infections on other parts of the body. Sometimes you have to take medicine by mouth. This medicine usually has to be taken for a long time, maybe even for months. Irritated skin takes time to heal. New hair or nails will have to grow back.

Children may return to school/childcare after treatment has been started.

What can I do to prevent tinea infections?

Skin that is kept clean and dry is your best defense. Also, you are less likely to get a tinea infection if you do the following things:

- When you're at home, take your shoes off and expose your feet to the air.
- Change your socks and underwear every day, especially in warm weather.
- Dry your feet carefully (especially between the toes) after bathing at home, in a locker room or public shower.
- Avoid walking barefoot in public areas. Instead, wear "flip-flops," sandals or water shoes.
- Don't wear thick clothing for long periods of time in warm weather. It will make you sweat more.
- Throw away worn-out exercise shoes. Never borrow other people's shoes.
- Check your pets for areas of hair loss. Ask your veterinarian to check them, too. It's important to check pets carefully, because if you don't find out whether they are causing your fungal infection, you may get it again from them, even after treatment.

Tinea infections usually do not leave scars after the fungus is gone.

For more information, call the Guilford County Department of Public Health at 641-7777 or visit our website at www.guilfordhealth.org