
Chilblains

Summary

- Chilblains are patches of red, swollen and itchy skin, thought to be caused by a combination of cold weather and poor circulation.
 - Extremities such as the toes, fingers, nose and earlobes are most at risk.
 - Elderly or sedentary people are most susceptible to developing chilblains.
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Chilblains are patches of discoloured (red, blue, white), swollen and itchy skin, believed to be caused by a combination of cold weather and poor circulation. The toes are particularly vulnerable, but other extremities that can develop chilblains include fingers, earlobes and the nose. Tight shoes can contribute by further reducing circulation to the toes.

Despite the discomfort, most chilblains don't cause any permanent damage to tissue, although in serious cases, it can result in an ulcer. As not everyone exposed to cold and damp conditions will develop chilblains, it is believed that those who do are overly sensitive to changes in weather and temperature. The elderly, sedentary, teenagers, and people with medical conditions (such as anaemia) are most susceptible.

Symptoms of chilbains

Chilblains most often develop on the toes. Common symptoms include:

- a burning sensation on the skin
- red, blue or white swollen patches
- intense itching
- dry skin, leading to splits and cracks
- possible secondary infection
- ulceration, in severe cases.

The circulation responds to temperature

Although the exact cause of chilblains remains unknown, it is thought to be associated with the body's reaction to cold weather. The body's circulatory system comprises arteries, veins and capillaries that carry blood to every cell. The circulatory system is sensitive to temperature.

In hot conditions, the body expands blood vessels close to the skin so that excess heat can be lost to the air, thereby cooling the body. In cold weather, these blood vessels constrict to conserve body heat. This constriction can starve extremities, such as the toes, of blood and warmth, if your peripheral circulation is sluggish.

Abrupt temperature changes

The symptoms of chilblains are made worse with sudden temperature changes – for example, entering a warm house after being outside in the cold. Similarly, heating cold feet too quickly, by propping them next to a heater or using a hot water bottle, will also exacerbate the condition. It is better to concentrate on warming your whole body instead.

Treating chilblains at home

Suggestions for treating chilblains at home include:

- Resist the urge to scratch, as this will further damage the skin.
 - Use calamine lotion or witch hazel to soothe the itching. Your chemist may also supply a suitable product.
 - Lanolin or similar, rubbed into the feet, will help retain body heat.
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- Wear woollen or cotton socks.
- Keep your whole body warm.
- Gentle exercise will improve circulation to your feet.

Prevention tips

Keeping your entire body warm at all times is the key to preventing chilblains. 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.
- Wear several layers of clothing.
- Make sure your shoes are comfortable and well fitted.
- Dry feet thoroughly after showering or bathing.
- Use woollen or cotton socks to allow your feet to 'breathe'.
- Have some gentle exercise, like walking, every day to improve peripheral circulation.
- See a podiatrist for regular professional treatments.

Professional treatment

Severe, ulcerating or recurring chilblains need professional attention. A qualified podiatrist can treat your chilblains and offer advice on prevention. If you suffer from severe and recurring chilblains, your doctor may prescribe a preventive drug. If you have a pre-existing condition, such as diabetes, you must see your doctor to check the circulation in the affected area without delay.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Podiatrist
- Australian Podiatry Association (Vic) – to find a podiatrist in your local area Tel. (03) 9895 4444.

Things to remember

- Chilblains are patches of red, swollen and itchy skin, thought to be caused by a combination of cold weather and poor circulation.
- Extremities such as the toes, fingers, nose and earlobes are most at risk.
- Elderly or sedentary people are most susceptible to developing chilblains.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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