



Oxford Health
NHS Foundation Trust

Podiatry

Chilblains

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What is chilblain?

Chilblains (which also go by the medical term 'Perniosis') are more common in older people, but anyone can be affected. It is thought that 1 in 10 people in the UK get chilblains at some stage in their life.

Chilblains are caused when your blood circulation responds abnormally to cold temperature, particularly when conditions are also damp or humid. The cold triggers the immune system cells to flood around the blood vessels causing patchy but intense swelling in the deep layer of the skin, so the area become swollen.

Frequent episodes of severe chilblains might also be a sign of an underlying medical problem such as connective tissue disorder, speak to your GP if you are concerned.

Symptoms

Symptoms develop within 12 to 24 hours after exposure to cold. The skin may first become itchy, then red and swollen with a burning sensation and sometimes very tender to touch with reddish purple plaques or lumps form.

In some cases, the skin over a chilblain may blister, and less commonly the skin may break down leaving a small ulcer which is prone to infection.

Prevention

There is little reliable evidence to show that medical treatments work and it is for this reason that prevention is most important.

- ✓ Stay warm. Wear gloves and long socks. Silver lined socks are also recommended. Try wearing bed socks.
- ✓ Avoid sudden changes of temperature when you can.
- ✓ Avoid cold damp environments when you can.
- ✓ Rewarm slowly. Do not put your hands and feet in front of a direct heat source for example radiator, hot water bottle. You may also put them in and out of warm but not hot water, then cold water, this is one easy way of rewarming them safely.
- ✓ Stay active. Try to keep up a daily routine of gentle exercise to aide healthy circulation.
- ✓ If you smoke, stopping is one of the best things you can do to help with Chilblain's. That's because it restricts the blood flow to the skin.
- ✓ Maintain a well balanced diet.

Footwear

Remember it is often the quality of the hosiery and the footwear and not necessarily the quantity, which is important.

- ✓ Make sure your shoes fit well and are comfortable. If they rub, the skin may become damaged or infected.
- ✓ Wear fleecy-lined shoes or boots, making sure they are not too tight fitting.
- ✓ Sheepskin is an ideal lining, but a synthetic lining in a leather shoe will also help.

Treatment

Chilblains usually go away over 7-14 days but if you are prone to them, they can reoccur.

If chilblains have developed, cover them with a loose dry dressing to avoid rubbing. If the skin is unbroken, 1% hydrocortisone cream from your doctor may help soothe the area. Balmosa cream is available on prescription or from your local pharmacy and some other topical creams can also be effective.

There is also some evidence that vitamin B and certain medications, for example vasodilators to keep the blood vessels open, helps to prevent chilblains.

Individual advice

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Accessibility

Patient information leaflets are available on our website:
www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/leaflets

Get in touch

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 Trust Headquarters
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Feedback

Our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) provides advice and support to patients, families, and carers, helping to resolve any problems, concerns, or complaints you may have.

Phone 0800 328 7971

Email PALS@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk

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