

# Grandma, Why Do Your Nails Look Like That?

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So, your nails are impossible to cut and they have taken on a yellowish or brownish color. Your nails used to look so good when they were polished that you showed them off while wearing open-toed sandals. And now...those same nails are hidden in shoes and polished just to cover them up. What happened?

Most likely you have onychomycosis or nails that have a fungus infection. This is a condition that affects millions of people throughout the world and is increasing in frequency. The nail(s) become yellowish-brown or opaque, thick, brittle, and may cause the nail to lift up from the nail bed or appear crumbly. Currently about 19% of the U.S. population is experiencing this condition. The percentages increase with age with almost 50% of people over the age of 70 having fungus nails. We have seen it in children as young as four and in people as old as 101. But why?

Fungus nails are caused by fungal organisms, much like those that cause Athlete's foot. These organisms grow best in a dark, damp, warm environment. What better place than in someone's socks and shoes where most feet are during waking hours. Frequently, a prior injury to the nail can set someone up for developing a fungus nail, because it allows the organism, which is normally on the skin, to work its way under the edge of the nail. There it sets up shop, so to speak, and grows unimpeded, thus changing the shape, color, and thickness of someone's nail(s).

## How can this condition be prevented?

- Examine your feet daily. Look for cuts, blisters, open sores, or any red, patchy lesions that can be either dry or moist. If there are any signs of Athlete's foot, you are predisposed to fungus nails.
- If you think you have an ingrown toenail, use warm, dilute, soapy water soaks. Apply a topical antibiotic ointment and a bandage. If you do not get relief, see your podiatrist.
- Wash your feet daily with a mild soap and lukewarm water. Dry your feet gently and thoroughly.
- Take regular care of your toenails.
- If you have diabetes, DO NOT use over the counter ingrown nail or fungal nail products. See your podiatrist if you have any questions about your nails or your feet.
- Don't wait to treat infections of the skin or the nails. The sooner that proper treatment is started, the greater the chance of improvement.

## How are mycotic nails treated?

If you think that you may have an infected nail, DO NOT try to remove the nail or any part of it. Again, avoid over-the-counter ingrown or fungus nail products without first consulting your health care provider or podiatrist. Fungal nails can be very difficult to treat with complete success. Often care is provided to keep the nails from becoming worse or to keep other nails from becoming infected.

Oral medications like terbinafine (Lamisil) or griseovulvin (Gris-Peg or Fulvicin) may help, but make sure that you have blood work done first, as liver damage is one of the known side-effects. There are multiple topical medications that can also be used to keep the condition from spreading and may lessen the infection. Recent studies indicate that a combination of oral and topical medications may be provide the best chance for improving the toenails. None of these treatments, however, are very effective if the nails are not debrided (reduced in length and thickness) professionally. This is where your podiatrist can help the most, as we have the expertise in trimming and grinding the nails to eliminate the infected part of the nail and provide comfort for the patient.

If you have any questions or concerns about the possibility of fungus infected nails, contact your podiatrist, who has the most recent information about this unsightly, and often painful condition known as onychomycosis.