A FREE PATIENT GUIDE FROM FOOT AND ANKLE INSTITUTE OF IOWA

Fungal Toenails: Diagnosis, Treatment & Prevention

A straightforward guide to accurate diagnosis, effective treatment, and preventing recurrence



Actual patient photographs shown with patient consent.

FOOT & ANKLE INSTITUTE OF IOWA

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A NOTE FROM DR. RUDY

Before We Treat a Nail, We Need to Know What It Is

A thick, yellow, brittle, or misshapen toenail may look like fungus, but appearance alone cannot reliably tell us the cause. Trauma, psoriasis, chronic shoe pressure, aging changes, and other nail disorders can look very similar.

That distinction matters. Fungal nail treatment can take many months, and no antifungal product can fix a nail problem that was never caused by fungus. My approach is to evaluate the nail carefully, and a nail biopsy is always performed before committing you to treatment.

Once we know what we are treating, we can build a plan around the severity of the infection, your health, your goals, and the factors that may be allowing the infection to persist or return.

To healthier feet,
Rudolph LaFontant, DPM
'Dr. Rudy'

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CHAPTER 1

Why Diagnosis Comes First

Onychomycosis is the medical term for a fungal infection of the nail. Many nonfungal nail conditions can produce the same thickening, discoloration, crumbling, or separation from the nail bed.

History

We review injuries, footwear, athlete's foot, prior treatments, and relevant medical conditions.

Examination

We examine the nail, surrounding skin, circulation, and neighboring toes.

Nail biopsy

A nail biopsy is always performed for laboratory testing so treatment is based on the diagnosis.

Why it matters

Confirming the cause helps avoid unnecessary treatment, expense, and delays.

DR. RUDY'S TIP

> *A nail biopsy has very little pain associated with it, but it is necessary for an accurate diagnosis and an appropriate treatment plan. I strongly recommend having the biopsy performed so treatment can be based on what is actually affecting the nail.*

CHAPTER 2

Why Toenail Fungus Is So Hard to Treat

Fungal nail infections can involve more than the visible nail. Fungus may persist in the nail plate, nail bed, surrounding skin, shoes, and other environmental sources. Treating only one part of the problem can leave reservoirs that contribute to recurrence.

The nail is a barrier

Dense keratin protects the toe but also limits penetration of many topical products.

The infection may extend under the nail

Fungal elements and infected debris can remain beneath thickened nail.

Toenails grow slowly

Damaged nail must grow forward and be replaced by healthier nail.

Reinfection is common

Warm, moist shoes, athlete's foot, contaminated tools, and repeated exposure can allow fungus to return.

DR. RUDY'S TIP

> *Clearing toenail fungus takes patience. The treatment plan and the environment around the foot both matter.*

CHAPTER 3

Why Over-the-Counter Products Often Disappoint

Many patients arrive after trying multiple liquids, creams, sprays, or home remedies. Many OTC products may even have 'nail' in the product name, but if you read the fine print, they are often indicated only for fungal skin infections rather than fungal infection of the nail itself. Treating an infected toenail is a different challenge.

Limited penetration

A thick nail can prevent a product from reaching the infection.

Wrong diagnosis

If the nail is not fungal, an antifungal cannot address the true cause.

Long treatment period

Consistent application may be required for many months.

Reinfection

Shoes, socks, skin, and nail instruments can remain a source of fungus.

Slow cosmetic change

The damaged nail must still grow out before it looks healthier.

Incomplete plan

Treating the nail alone may ignore athlete's foot, moisture, and footwear.

DR. RUDY'S TIP

> *Correct diagnosis, realistic expectations, and a complete treatment plan matter more than trying one bottle after another.*

CHAPTER 4

What Causes Fungal Toenails?

Fungi are more likely to establish an infection when they have access to the nail and a warm, moist environment in which to persist.

Athlete's foot

Skin fungus can act as a reservoir and spread to the nails.

Moisture & sweating

Damp shoes create favorable conditions for fungal growth.

Nail trauma

Tight shoes, repeated pressure, sports injuries, or prior nail trauma can damage the nail and make fungal infection easier to establish.

Shared wet environments

Locker rooms, communal showers, and pools increase exposure.

Age & slow growth

Slower nail growth and cumulative exposure increase risk.

Medical factors

Diabetes, impaired circulation, and immune conditions can complicate treatment.

DR. RUDY'S TIP

> *Treating the nail without treating athlete's foot, moisture, footwear, and other contributing factors can set the stage for recurrence.*

CHAPTER 5

Our Treatment Approach

There is no single treatment that is best for every patient. We select therapy based on the confirmed diagnosis, the amount of nail involved, nail thickness, medical history, previous treatment, and your preferences.

Lunula Laser

A non-thermal, low-level laser performed in the office. Because the laser is non-thermal, there is **no pain** associated with its use. Our program typically includes 6 sessions: once weekly for 4 weeks, then once monthly for 2 months. No anesthesia or downtime.

Tolcylen® topical care

Physician-directed home nail and skin care may be recommended to support treatment and help reduce reinfection risk.

Professional nail care

Periodic thinning and debridement can reduce fungal load, improve comfort and appearance, and help topical treatments reach the nail more effectively.

Prescription options

Prescription topical or oral antifungal medication may be discussed when appropriate for the confirmed diagnosis and your medical history.

DR. RUDY'S TIP

> *The most effective plan is individualized. We combine the diagnosis with your health history, nail involvement, and treatment goals.*

CHAPTER 6

Shoe & Foot Hygiene: Treat the Environment Too

Successful treatment is not only about the nail. Reducing moisture and fungal exposure can help lower the chance of reinfection.

Keep feet & socks dry

Dry carefully between the toes. Use moisture-wicking socks and change them whenever they become damp.

Treat shoes too

Use antifungal spray or powder in footwear. Heavily contaminated shoes may need replacement; a UV shoe sanitizer may also be considered.

Rotate footwear

Allow shoes to dry thoroughly between uses. Athletic footwear may benefit from 2-3 days of drying time before reuse.

Treat athlete's foot

Skin fungus can spread back to the nails. Treat athlete's foot promptly, including in household members who may also be infected.

Clean nail tools

Do not share clippers, files, towels, or personal nail-care items. Keep nails short and clean, and clean tools after use.

Protect in wet areas

Wear shower shoes or flip-flops in pools, spas, locker rooms, communal showers, and gyms. Avoid walking barefoot in these areas.

DR. RUDY'S TIP

> *If we treat the nail but ignore the skin and the environment around it, we may leave opportunities for the infection to return.*

CHAPTER 7

What Recovery Really Looks Like

The old damaged nail does not turn healthy overnight. Improvement appears as new nail grows from the base. Visible change often takes 6-12 months or longer; a severely involved great toenail may take 12-18 months to grow out, and some patients may continue to notice improvement over 1-2 years.

0-3 MONTHS	Getting Started	Once the biopsy confirms a fungal infection, treatment begins. Early clear growth may start to become noticeable near the base.
3-6 MONTHS	Early Progress	A healthier band of nail may become easier to see as it advances forward.
6-12 MONTHS	Continued Growth	More of the damaged nail grows out. Progress depends on severity, growth rate, adherence, and reinfection risk.
12-18 MONTHS	Replacement	A severely involved great toenail may require this long to be substantially or completely replaced.

DR. RUDY'S TIP

> *Do not judge success only by the old nail. We look for the direction of growth: healthier nail emerging from the base and moving forward over time.*

READY WHEN YOU ARE

Ready to Stop Guessing About Your Toenails?

You do not have to keep trying product after product without knowing what is actually causing the nail change. The first step is an accurate diagnosis, followed by a treatment plan built around you.

Schedule Your Fungal Toenail Evaluation Today

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Thank you for taking the time to learn more about fungal toenails. My goal is to give you a clearer picture of what is going on with your nail and help you choose the right next step. Results vary, and reinfection can occur even after improvement, which is why follow-up and prevention remain important.

Rudolph LaFontant, DPM
Foot and Ankle Institute of Iowa

FOOT & ANKLE INSTITUTE OF IOWA

Helping you put YOUR best foot forward, every step of the way.