

Chilblains

Podiatry Department

Patient Information Leaflet

What are Chilblains?

Chilblains are small, itchy, painful, red lesions on the skin.

Chilblains are caused by an abnormal skin reaction whereby the small blood vessels can't cope with the rapid change in temperature. They tend to occur on extremities that easily become cold, such as your toes, fingers, nose and earlobes. However, other areas of skin sometimes develop chilblains when they become cold.

Some people with poor circulation and other problems with their blood vessels are more prone to developing chilblains. In particular, people who have a condition called Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) are more likely to get chilblains.

However, most chilblains occur in people who are otherwise healthy.

Chilblains can feel painful, burning and itchy. They appear as small red, blue or purple areas which can become swollen. Chilblains occur several hours after being exposed to the cold. You may get just one chilblain but often several develop. They may join together to form a larger swollen, red area of skin

The skin can crack and the area can become infected. This is of most concern in high-risk patients such as those with diabetes or who already have poor circulation and are slow to heal.

What can you do about chilblains?

Although they are uncomfortable, chilblains do not cause permanent damage and will heal on their own if further exposure to cold is avoided.

With chilblains, prevention is much better than cure. Preventing your feet from becoming too cold avoids the rapid re-warming later on which causes the chilblain.

Some suggestions are:

- Protect the fingers and hands by wearing gloves.
- Protect the head and ears by wearing a hat and scarf.
- Wear appropriate socks (two thin pairs) and shoes to insulate the feet from the cold.
- Wear adequate clothing to keep the body warm. Clothing should be loose and in layers to trap body heat.
- Keep dry to reduce heat loss.
- Do not scratch or rub chilblains. Soothing lotions such as witch hazel or calamine will take away most of the discomfort.
- Do not directly overheat chilblains (for example using hot water).
- Apply emollients (moisturisers) to the affected areas to keep the skin supple
- Balmosa ointment can be very soothing for affected areas and can be applied if the skin is not broken or cracked
- If the skin breaks or cracks apply a dry sterile dressing (such as a normal adhesive plaster) to protect the area. Antiseptic ointments such as Sudocrem can be soothing to broken areas of skin and help prevent infections

It is most important if your feet have got cold not to stand next to a heat source such as a fire or radiator. Let your feet and legs warm up slowly; this gives the small blood vessels a chance to respond normally.

If you smoke then you should try to stop, as smoking can make chilblains worse.

If you suffer with chilblains and are concerned, you should contact your GP or podiatrist for advice and/or treatment

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

Podiatry Department

Call **01384 321427** (9am-5pm, Monday to Friday) or e-mail dgft.podiatry.appointments@nhs.net

This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:

<http://dgft.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/>

If you have any feedback on this patient information leaflet, please email dgft.patient.information@nhs.net

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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