

## Your feet – indicators of health

Because they are so far away from our heart, our feet are often the first part of the body to show something is wrong with the way blood circulates in our body.

The condition of our toenails can signal the presence or beginning of several diseases. For example, toenails that are hollow instead of being rounded can indicate iron deficiency or anemia (a shortage of red blood cells). Increased nail thickness, or bumps on the nail, can be manifestations of psoriasis, a skin disease.

Your podiatrist will always check the condition of your toenails, and can provide a range of treatments for all your toenail problems.

## Our toenails

The major parts of the toenail are: the nail itself (or the nail plate); its **matrix**, from where the nail grows; the **lunula**, the white, moon-shaped area at the base of the nail; the **nail bed**, or the tissue on which the nail lies, and the **sulcus**, or the groove at the side in which the nail sits.

Healthy nails are pink, free of dirt and impairment, and grow into the grooves normally. Toenails grow constantly. It takes up to 12 months to replace the toenail of your big toe.

## Who gets nail problems?

Toenails of people of all ages can undergo a range of changes, some of which are relatively common. They can become thick, brittle, curved, discolored, infected, clubbed, bumpy and grooved. In some cases, the nail falls off and a new one grows in. As we grow older, we are more likely to develop toenail problems.

## What causes nail problems?

Toenail problems may be caused by warts, tumours under the nail, infection, or poor circulation. Major toenail problem culprits are incorrectly fitting shoes, which press too tightly on the toenails. Injury, such as bruising under the nail and infection can cause permanent nail deformity.



## Common conditions and treatment

**INGROWN TOENAILS** are the most common toenail problem. They may be caused by improperly trimmed toenails, very curved edges of nails, shoe pressure or repeated trauma to the feet from normal activities. They may also be inherited. Frequently the pain is due to a corn or callous in the groove (or sulcus) of the toenail.

Most cases will require conservative treatment, while others may need a minor surgical correction which can be conducted in your podiatrist's rooms using a local anaesthetic.

**THICKENED NAILS** is a common condition. Usually it's the result of injury to the nail bed, such as dropping something heavy on your toes or fungal infection. They can be easily and painlessly thinned down by a podiatrist.

**FUNGAL INFECTIONS** are among the most troublesome of nail conditions to treat. They are often characterised by thickening, discoloration and separation of the front of the nail from the nail bed. In some cases the nail crumbles. These infections tend to stay in the nail if they are not treated, and can infect the nail bed.

There are a range of anti-fungal medications available for treatment. Your podiatrist can assist with trimming and care of out-of-shape nail plates.

**OTHER INFECTIONS** cause inflammation of the matrix (onychia) and inflammation of the tissue adjacent to the nail (paronychia). In people with lowered immunity, this may sometimes lead to serious complications, including more widespread infection extending up the leg. Your podiatrist can detect such infections early and form a suitable treatment plan.

**TRAUMA** to the nails may lead to permanent nail deformity. This can be cared for by regular, non-painful podiatric treatment, involving filing and possibly the use of a special drill.

## Older people

Older people with poor circulation are prone to fragile or brittle nails.

Many older people do not have the strength, flexibility, or eyesight to trim their nails, especially if the nails are deformed. They should seek podiatric care for these services, and advice regarding safe self care.

## Warning signs

Any sudden changes in color or shape of the nail, sign of infection, development of a freckle under the nail, or pain should be discussed with your podiatrist. Your podiatrist can diagnose the problem and then advise an appropriate treatment.

## Taking care of your nails

- Trim toenails straight across to a length just below the end of the toe. Do not round off the corners – this can cause ingrown toenails.
- Use a strong pair of nail clippers.
- After clipping, smooth nails with a file

or emery board, using downward strokes.

- Wear only properly fitted shoes, not short or narrow ones.
- Wash feet regularly, especially between the toes, and dry thoroughly.
- Wear socks or stockings that are not too restrictive.



## Your podiatrist

Podiatrists are highly skilled health professionals trained to deal with the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of medical and surgical conditions of the feet and lower limbs. Podiatrists have completed a Bachelor of Podiatry or higher degree, and are continually upgrading their skills and knowledge through further education and training.

Regular visits to your podiatrist can help prevent recurrences of toenail and associated foot problems.

## Where can I find a podiatrist?

Refer to your Yellow Pages (™) for a list of podiatrists in your area, or contact the Australian Podiatry Association in your state, or the New Zealand Society of Podiatrists. Many health funds provide cover for podiatry services on their ancillary tables and government funded services are available through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, some public hospitals and community health centres.

MY PODIATRIST IS:



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