

Chilblains

What are Chilblains?

Chilblains are small, itchy swellings on the skin that can occur as a reaction to cold temperatures, they will mostly affect the toes, fingers, heels, ears and nose. Chilblains can be rather uncomfortable but rarely cause any permanent damage and will normally heal within a few weeks if further exposure to the cold is avoided.



What causes it?

Chilblains generally develop in the winter, this is because the low temperature can cause a constriction to the arterioles (a small branch of an artery leading into capillaries) supplying blood to the skin, and followed by a rapid warming there is subsequent damage which can lead to a blistering, redness, and sometimes itchy lesion. They are especially common in the UK because damp and cold weather is the norm during the winter months. There are also several reasons why you could be more likely to develop chilblains namely if you have poor circulation, any family history of chilblains or just if you work in a job that means you are regularly exposed to any cold, damp or draughty conditions.

What will happen if I leave it?

Chilblains often get better on their own without treatment after a week or two however if you develop severe or recurring chilblains, there's a small risk of further problems developing, such as infection from blistered or scratched skin this can lead to permanent scarring. Ulcers may also form on the skin which can be very painful when moving. It's often possible to avoid these complications by not scratching or rubbing the affected areas of skin and to avoid directly overheating the chilblains.

What can help?

If you're susceptible to chilblains, you can reduce your risk of developing them by making sure to limit exposure to any cold environments, you can look after your feet by taking steps to improve your circulation, even small things like making sure you keep active when out in cold weather. If your skin does get cold, it's important to make sure you warm it up gradually, if you heat up the skin too quickly, for example by placing your feet in hot water or near a heater this can be one of the main causes of chilblains. Looking after your feet will help reduce your chances of developing chilblains, if you moisturise your feet regularly this will help stop the skin cracking, warm your shoes on the radiator before you put them on and if your shoes do get wet make sure they are dry before you wear them.

What are the treatment options?

It may help to use a soothing lotion, such as calamine or witch hazel, to relieve itching. As before a combination of regular exercise, and a healthy diet have also been shown to reduce the incidence of chilblains, but the most important factor is keeping toes warm for as long as possible. If the skin does break, applying a dressing is vital to prevent an infection. If the area does become infected your Podiatrist may have to issue you with a bout of antibiotics to treat the infection.