

Ingrowing toenails

A patient's guide

What is an ingrowing toenail?

An ingrowing toenail is where a piece of nail causes a break in the skin surrounding the nail. This can lead to redness, pain, swelling and possible infection. An involuted toenail is sometimes confused with an ingrowing toe nail, which is where a nail curls into the flesh but is not actually piercing the skin. This can also feel painful and appear red and inflamed.



What are the symptoms of an Ingrowing Toenail?

An ingrowing toenail can occur on any toe, but most often affects the big toe, on one or both sides. Symptoms include:

- pain if pressure is placed on the toe
- inflammation of the skin at the end of the toe
- a build-up of fluid in the area surrounding the toe
- an overgrowth of skin around the affected toe
- bleeding
- white or yellow pus coming from the affected area



What causes an ingrowing toe nail?

There are many causes:

- badly cut toenails is the most common cause of ingrowing toenails – cutting your toenails too short, or cutting the edges, will encourage the skin to fold over your nail and the nail to grow into the skin
- wearing tight-fitting shoes, socks or tights – this places pressure on the skin around your toenail; the skin may be pierced if it is pressed on to your toenail
- sweaty feet – if the skin around your toenails is soft, it is easier for your nail to pierce it and embed itself within it
- injury – for example, stubbing your toe can sometimes cause an ingrown toenail to develop
- natural shape of the nail – the sides of curved or fan-shaped toenails are more likely to press into the skin surrounding the nail

How to avoid the problem when trimming nails

- Do cut nails straight across following the natural contour of your nail.
- Do file any sharp or rough edges.
- Do not cut down at the sides – the corners of the nail should be visible.
- Do not cut nails too short – the free white edge at the end of the nail should still be visible.

If you think you may have an ingrowing toenail, you are advised to seek advice from a health care professional. Without treatment an ingrowing toenail may become infected, so it is important that you keep your feet clean and cover any areas of concerns with a sterile dressing, which you can buy from a pharmacist.

You may need a once off review to remove any nail spikes from the skin, trim the nails so they are straight or to get education of how to manage your nail care effectively in the future.

Sometimes, where cutting the nails will not correct the problem, a minor surgery is preformed to resolve the problem and stop it from happening again.

There are two common minor surgical procedures that can be carried out to toenails depending on which problem you have. Both procedures will involve a local anaesthetic. Sometimes nail surgery is also preformed when the nail is very thick or damaged.

If you would like more information on the surgical procedures please see our Nail surgery advice leaflet.

Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please contact us on 020 7288 3182. We will try our best to meet your needs.

Whittington Health NHS Trust
Magdala Avenue
London
N19 5NF
Phone: 020 7272 3070
www.whittington.nhs.uk

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