



Suffolk Podiatry

Chilblains

What are Chilblains?

Chilblains are small, itchy, painful, red swellings on the skin. They are thought to be caused by an abnormal skin reaction to the cold and tend to occur on the extremities such as the toes, fingers, nose and earlobes. However, other areas of the skin sometimes develop chilblains when they become cold such as the heel, lower leg and thigh. They usually occur after exposure to the cold and can even be present without physical symptoms.

Chilblains are very common. It is thought that 1 in 10 people in the UK develop chilblains at some stage in their life. They occur when tiny blood vessels in the feet narrow (constrict). The blood supply to areas of the skin may then become slow. As the skin re-warms, there is some leakage of fluid from the blood vessels into the tissues.

What are the symptoms of Chilblains?

- Inflammation
- Swelling
- Itching or burning sensations
- Tender to touch or friction from hosiery/footwear
- They are usually red to start with but may become purple
- In some cases, the skin over a chilblain can blister and sometimes the skin can break down causing a wound



Some people get chilblains if cold skin is warmed up too quickly, for example with a hot water bottle, or by sitting very close to a fire.

Treatment for Chilblains

- Keep the affected area warm. This means wearing thick socks containing wool or thermal properties when outdoors and putting shoes under a radiator before wear
- Loose fitting bed socks can help keep feet warm at night
- Drying and gradually warming the skin after cold exposure avoiding the use of direct heat such as hot water, radiator or hot water bottles
- No other treatment is normally needed as they usually go away by themselves within 2-3 weeks
- A range of soothing creams are available from your local pharmacy or online. These may ease the soreness until symptoms go
- A steroid cream rubbed onto the chilblain may reduce itch and soreness
- Medication is sometimes used to prevent chilblains in those patients who have recurring chilblains. A drug called nifedipine can dilate (open wide) the small blood vessels and help to prevent chilblains
- Avoid smoking, caffeine and decongestants as these can cause blood vessel constriction and reduce blood flow

If the skin is broken, you should apply a sterile dressing and seek the help of your GP or a private podiatrist. You can check whether a private podiatrist is properly qualified by looking on the HCPC website: <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/>

Footwear

Never walk barefoot as it is possible to damage your feet without knowing. You should also make sure your footwear fits well as many foot problems can be directly related to poor-fitting shoes or socks. Lace up or Velcro fastenings give more support than slip-on shoes. For more information see our advice sheet *Footwear Advice* on the Suffolk GP Federation website.

More information on Chilblains can be found on the NHS website at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chilblains/>