

Suffolk Podiatry

Chilblains

What are Chilblains?

Chilblains are small, itchy, painful, red swellings on the skin. They are 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.

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 skin.

What are the symptoms of Chilblains?

- Inflammation.
- Pain.
- Swelling.
- Itching or burning sensations.
- Tender to touch or friction from hosiery/footwear.
- They are usually red to start with but may become purple/brown.
- 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 either socks containing wool or thermal properties or by wearing two pairs of thin socks.
- Wearing thermal leggings will also help.
- Loose fitting bed socks can help keep feet warm at night.
- Wear sensible shoes. For more information see our advice footwear Advice on the Suffolk GP Federation website.
- Dry the skin gently after cold exposure. Gradually warm the area, avoiding direct heat such as hot water bottles or radiators.
- Often no other treatment is needed as chilblains 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 weak steroid cream rubbed onto the chilblain may reduce itch and soreness. These should only be used under guidance of a healthcare professional.
- Your GP may prescribe a medication (nifedipine) for those patients who have recurring 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 practice or a private podiatrist. We recommend that any podiatrist you see is registered with the HCPC. You can check their membership details by going to: <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/>

Information on Chilblains can also be found on the NHS website at:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chilblains/>

Suffolk Podiatry
Podiatry Hub, Riverside Clinic 2-4 Landseer Rd, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP3 0AZ
www.suffolkfed.org.uk

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