

Ingrown Toenails

What is an ingrown toenail?

When a toenail is ingrown, the sides or corners of the nail curl down and dig into the skin, causing swelling, pain and redness.

What causes an ingrown toenail?

While many things can cause ingrown toenails, 2 major causes are poorly fitting shoes and improperly trimmed nails. Shoes that are too tight press the sides of the nail and encourage it to curl in. Nails that are peeled off at the edge or trimmed down into the corners are also more likely to become ingrown.

To avoid ingrown toenails, nails should be cut straight across. The top of the nail should make a straight line.

What is the best treatment for a painful toenail?

When the problem is mild, all you may need to do is soak your foot in warm water and place dry cotton, such as part of a cotton ball, under the corner of the nail. Signs that the problem is getting worse include increasing pain, swelling and drainage of the area. Sometimes surgery is needed to remove the part of the nail that is poking into the skin.

What kind of surgery is performed to fix the toenail?

Your doctor will first numb your toe by injecting it with an anesthetic. Then your doctor will cut your toenail along the edge that is growing into the skin, and pull out the piece of nail. Finally, your doctor may apply a small electrical charge or a liquid solution to the exposed part of the nail bed so that the toenail will not grow into the skin again. This part of the surgery is called ablation, and your doctor will decide whether it needs to be done. Not all patients need ablation.

What should I do to care for my foot after surgery?

- Soak your foot daily in warm water.
- Apply antibiotic ointment at least twice a day to the site.
- Keep a bandage over the site until it heals.
- Take acetaminophen (brand name: Tylenol) or ibuprofen (brand names: Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) as needed for pain.
- Keep the wound clean and dry. It is okay to shower the day after surgery.
- Wear loosely fitting shoes or sneakers for the first 2 weeks.
- Avoid running or strenuous activity for 2 weeks.

- Call your doctor if you have problems with the area, such as increasing pain, swelling, redness or drainage.
- Avoid high heels and tight-fitting shoes in the future.
- Trim nails straight across. Don't pick at your nails or tear them at the corners.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

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