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Ingrown Toenails

Overview

What is an ingrown toenail?

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

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes an ingrown toenail?

While many things can cause ingrown toenails, the major causes are shoes that don't fit well and improperly trimmed nails. Shoes that are too tight press the sides of the nail and make it curl into the skin. Nails that are peeled off at the edge or trimmed down at the corners are also more likely to become ingrown.

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

Treatment

What is the treatment for a painful ingrown toenail?

When the problem is mild, you may only need to soak your foot in warm water for 15 to 20 minutes 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. Your doctor may suggest an oral antibiotic or an antibiotic ointment if there are signs of infection. Sometimes minor 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 he or she 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. This keeps the toenail from growing 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 toe after surgery?

- Soak your foot daily in warm water.
- Apply antibiotic ointment to the site at least twice a day.
- Keep a bandage over the site until it heals.

- Take acetaminophen (one brand name: Tylenol) or ibuprofen (one brand name: Motrin) 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 the first 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 now and in the future.
- Trim nails straight across. Don't pick at your nails or tear them at the corners.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What treatment is best for me?
- Will I need surgery?
- Will you have to remove my toenail?
- What kinds of shoes should I wear?
- Can you show me how to trim my nails?
- Is there anything I should do at home to make my toe feel better?
- Do I need an antibiotic?

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Reviewed/Updated: 12/10

Created: 01/95