



FootScope

A foot health message from
Proactive Podiatry

Chilblains

Chilblains are small red lumps that form on the skin as a response to



cold. The lumps are usually painful and very itchy. They form on the extremities (ears, nose, fingers, heels, toes), most commonly on the toes and other areas of the feet and although you can get a single chilblain, it is common for a few to pop up at the same time. Chilblains can affect anyone and are common in healthy people, although those with poor circulation can be at higher risk, as the blood vessels will be more constricted. Your risk of chilblains is higher if you have suffered from chilblains in the past.

When toes — or other extremities — get cold the blood vessels narrow and the blood supply will be slower than usual. This is what causes your toes to look blue if they're cold, they just don't have as much blood circulating around them as usual. When your toes start to warm up, blood rushes through the warmer and therefore wider blood vessels, sometimes rushing through too fast and leaking into the tissue around the vessels causing swelling that appear as chilblains. They will usually appear within a few hours of exposure to cold. Due to the environmental link with chilblains, people in cold, wet climates are more likely to suffer from chilblains than those in drier climates with less humidity (even if the temperature is low).

Chilblains aren't serious and can usually be treated at home. Symptoms usually last for 7–14 days and then clear up, although if a blister forms around the chilblain or if the skin breaks, it may take longer to heal and the wound should be cleaned regularly and checked for signs of infection. Rarely, a chilblain can form an ulcer, which can be serious if left untreated due to the risk of infection. See your podiatrist before an ulcer develops. Chilblains have no long-term effects, although some people struggle with chronic chilblains and require medication to improve circulation and decrease the risk of recurrence.

The best way to prevent chilblains is to stay warm in cold weather and try to keep your body at an even temperature. It is thought that warming up too quickly can cause chilblains as the blood vessels are widening rapidly in the heat and are more likely to leak fluid to cause swelling. So as much as that hot water bottle sounds like a great idea, save it until your body has warmed up at a slower pace.

TOP TIPS TO AVOID CHILBLAINS

Chilblains are caused by cold weather, which makes them more of a winter problem than a summer one. While it may be sunny and warm in most parts of Australia at this time of year, the temptation to use the summer holidays for a northern hemisphere vacation is often too good to pass up. Many of you will be flying off to colder climes with unfamiliar temperatures with a potential for snow, ice, and generally cold and wet conditions. Here are our tips for keeping chilblains at bay:

1. STAY WARM

Wear socks that adequately warm the feet in cold climates. Keep the rest of your body warm by wearing layers and protective clothing as the warmer your core is, the more heat you can retain for your feet. If you're in snowy or icy conditions, this will mean wearing moisture wicking sports socks that are made to keep your feet warm and dry.

2. WARM UP GRADUALLY

When your extremities are cold, heating them up quickly with a hot water bottle between your ankles or resting your feet close to that lovely open fire is great in theory, but the rapid warm up can be bad for you. It's thought that warming up too quickly can cause the blood vessels to leak fluid into the surround tissue as they start to expand and the blood rushes back through them. This is what leads to the swelling and red colouring as lumps form around the affected areas.

3. CHECK YOUR MEDS

Some medications, such as beta blockers, can cause the blood vessels to constrict, leading to chilblains. If you have a pre-existing history of chilblains, taking medications that restrict blood flow to the extremities can increase the risk of recurrence.

4. GIVE YOUR FEET SPACE

Make sure your shoes and socks aren't too tight. If the feet are squished into shoes circulation will be affected, increasing the risk of chilblains.

5. GET ACTIVE

Exercise is a great way to keep the circulation flowing and keep the blood vessels open. Regular activity will improve circulation and decrease risk of chilblains.

6. AVOID SMOKING

Smoking constricts the blood vessels and can make chilblains worse.

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