

Chilblains (Perniosis)

What are chilblains?

Chilblains are an injury to the skin of the hands and feet (although they can occur elsewhere like nose, ears, buttocks) caused by cold temperatures. The other name for chilblains is perniosis.

What causes chilblains?

In cold environments our body temperature can drop slightly. The body naturally reduces blood flow to the skin to keep the warm blood for the brain, heart and kidneys. For some unknown reason, in people with chilblains the blood supply to the skin is inadequate and the cells may be damaged, leaking chemicals which cause pain, swelling and itchiness.

What are the symptoms of chilblains?

Chilblains causes painful red lumps, which can also feel itchy, especially as they first appear. The lumps can appear quickly. They may be around the joints and can look like arthritis of the fingers and toes.

Who gets it?

Anyone, at any age, can get chilblains, but it seems to be most common in teenage girls.

Some people are more at risk:

- girls going through puberty
- people who wear inadequate clothing in colder weather
- people who are less 'well insulated', i.e. skinny

How is it diagnosed?

Your child's doctor will diagnose chilblains from the typical symptoms and appearance. There is rarely a need for further tests.

How are chilblains treated?

The aim of management is to have warm blood circulating to the fingers and toes. This means it's important to keep the whole body warm. Wearing gloves and warm socks will help keep the fingers and toes warm. It is also essential to keep the rest of the body warm with jackets, scarves, and hats when outside, and to ensure adequate clothing is worn inside. Chilblains can re-occur easily with even brief exposure to cold, so it is important to be consistent. Exposure to cigarette smoke makes chilblains worse.

For particularly severe cases, medication can be used to improve the blood supply to fingers and toes.

ARTHRITIS

INFORMATION SHEET

How can I help my child with chilblains?

It can be useful to avoid:

- Smoking (even being around smokers)
- Caffeinated drinks (tea, coffee, cola and energy drinks)
- Certain medications (ask your doctor)

Living with chilblains

Chilblains tend to occur in crops which usually settle down over several weeks. The chilblains may re-occur from time to time in colder weather.

What is the outlook for my child?

Chilblains tend to become less of a problem after adolescence. There are no long term effects. Symptoms are usually milder in warmer months.

Key points

- Chilblains are not a serious problem and there are no long term effects.
- By wearing warmer clothes, and especially warm socks and gloves, the chilblains may improve or be prevented.
- Chilblains will usually improve in warmer months and over time.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

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