

Paronychia (Nail-fold Infection)

Paronychia is common. Treatment is with antibiotics for bacterial infections, or with antifungals for infection caused by candida or a fungus.

What is paronychia?

Paronychia is an infection of the skin, which is just next to a nail (the nail-fold). The infected nail fold looks swollen, inflamed, and may be tender. The nail itself may become infected or damaged if a nail-fold infection is left untreated.

What causes nail-fold infections?

- **Bacteria** tend to cause acute (sudden onset) nail-fold infections, which are painful. Pus may form under the skin next to the nail.
- **Candida**, which is a yeast (a type of fungus), is another common cause. Candida nail-fold infections tend to develop slowly and cause chronic (persistent) infection.
- **Other microbes (bugs)** such as viruses and other fungi are less common causes.

Why do nail-fold infections develop?

Many nail-fold infections occur for no apparent reason. However, the following can increase the risk of bugs getting into the nail-fold skin and causing infection.

- **Water.** You are more likely to develop a nail-fold infection if your hands are in water for long periods, particularly with detergents. Cleaners, bartenders, beauticians, dish washers, etc, are prone to nail-fold infections. Constant washing may damage the nail fold and allow infection to develop.
- **Injury.** For example, nail biting, poor manicure, damaged or diseased nails or nail folds, etc.
- **Covering.** For example, if you use gloves for long periods, or use artificial nails, it can cause a moist, airless condition around your fingernails. This is good for some bugs to thrive and cause infection.

What is the treatment for nail-fold infections?

- **For bacterial infections**, antibiotics are usually prescribed. Sometimes pus from a bacterial infection has to be drained by a small cut if it collects next to the nail.
- **Candida and fungal** nail-fold infections are usually treated with an antifungal cream. You may need treatment for several weeks before the infection goes completely. Sometimes an antifungal medicine by mouth is needed to clear the infection, particularly if the infection spreads to the nail in addition to the nail fold.

The following may help to prevent a recurrence of nail-fold infections

- Do not bite your nails or 'pick' at the skin next to nails.
- Keep your hands and feet dry as much as possible. Dry well after washing.
- Wear rubber gloves (preferably cotton lined) if you work a lot with water.
- Do not wear gloves or artificial nails for long periods.
- It is probably best not to have a manicure.