

# Chilblains

Information for patients

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**Podiatry Department**

## **What are chilblains?**

Chilblains are small red or dark blue patches that appear on the skin. They cause the skin to become fragile and can sometimes break down to an ulcer (open wound). These ulcers may become infected. This is called a broken chilblain.

## **What causes chilblains?**

It is normal for your blood vessels to become narrow when it is cold, and to grow wider again when it becomes warmer. Sometimes the blood vessels can't cope with being warmed up too quickly, causing blood to leak into the surrounding tissue. This abnormal reaction to the cold causes chilblains.

Chilblains usually appear a few hours after being in cold and damp environments. Heating your feet or hands up too quickly is a common cause. Using hot water bottles, running your hands or feet under hot water or sitting too close to a radiator or fire are all examples of warming yourself up too quickly, and should be avoided.

They are more common in older people, but they can also affect people who smoke or who have poor circulation, poor diet or low body weight. Chilblains can also occur in those who are regularly in cold, damp and draughty conditions.

## **Signs and symptoms**

- Small red or dark blue patches on the skin
- Chilblains most commonly appear on the toes and fingers, but they can also occur on your heels, nose, and ears
- They can feel painful, itchy, hot or like they are burning
- Toes and fingers can become swollen

- You might also notice an open wound or bleeding – this is a broken chilblain. You should cover it with a plaster or dressing and seek help.
- You might notice pus or leaking fluid – this is an infected broken chilblain. You should cover it with a plaster or dressing and seek help.

## **Treatments available**

Chilblains usually go away after 2-3 weeks and can be managed easily at home. Your Pharmacist can also recommend over the counter creams which help to soothe painful or itching skin.

There are several steps you can take to treat chilblains yourself and to prevent them from returning:

- Avoid being in cold, damp conditions as much as possible
- Wear warm clothes and keep your hands and feet warm to help keep your body at a constant temperature
- Wearing cotton or wool socks are better at keeping your feet warm than other materials, such as nylon tights
- Change into a clean pair of socks before bed
- When you are cold, avoid warming your hands and feet up too quickly. Instead, allow your hands and feet to warm up gradually by gently rubbing the skin, adding more layers or sitting in a warm room away from direct heat
- Avoid wearing damp shoes and clothing
- Stopping smoking will help to improve circulation
- Regular activity helps improve circulation
- Check your feet, or get help to regularly check your feet, for wounds or infections on your feet.

## **When to seek help**

If the skin is broken or if you notice bleeding, pus or fluid leaking you should contact the Podiatry Department immediately.

If you get severe chilblains or if they keep coming back, you should speak to your GP or Podiatrist. They will check your circulation and if it is poor they may recommend taking a tablet or offer extra advice and treatment.

Existing patients should call on the numbers below. If you are not yet a patient of the Podiatry Department you can self-refer by asking for a self-referral form from your GP reception or by downloading one from our website:

<https://weare.nhslothian.scot/podiatry/access-to-the-service/>

It's important to give as much information as you can when contacting us and completing the referral form. This will help us to prioritise you. If you are housebound, please ask your GP to refer you urgently.

**Podiatry Department – 0131 536 1627**

**Patients who are housebound, or reside in a nursing home or hospital ward – 0131 446 4631**

**Out of office hours you should contact NHS 24 by dialling 111**