

An infection around your finger or toe nail (paronychia)

Emergency Department

Information for Patients

Produced: November 2025

Updated: December 2025

Review: November 2028

Leaflet number: 1670 Version: 1.1

What is a paronychia?

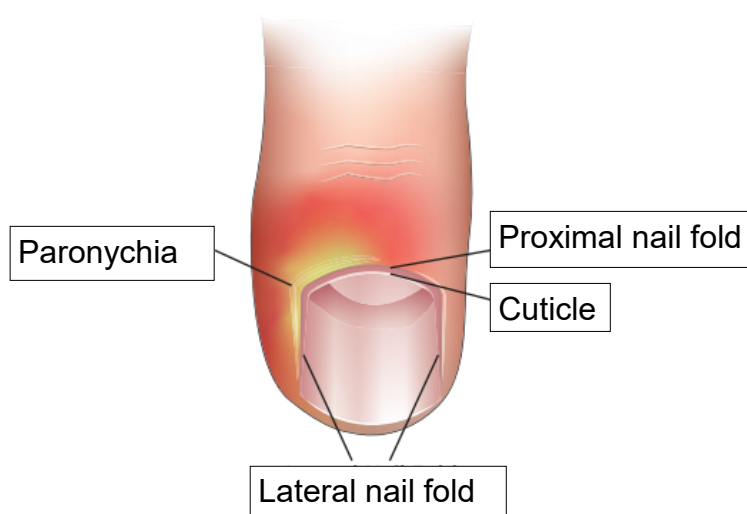
A paronychia is an infection around the nail, usually where the skin meets the side or base of the nail in the finger or toe. It may also be called a 'whitlow'.

It can happen because of:

- Nail biting or sucking fingers/thumbs
- Picking the skin near the nails
- Poor nail care or damaged nails
- Ingrown toenails or tight shoes

What are the signs?

- The skin near the nail may be red, swollen, and sore.
- Pus (yellow fluid) might build up under the skin.
- The nail itself may become infected or damaged if left untreated.



Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
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How is it treated?

Treatment depends on how bad the infection is:

- **Warm salt water soaks:** Soak the finger or toe in warm salty water. Gently massage the area while in the water for 10 to 15 minutes. Do this at least 2 times a day. This helps reduce swelling and can stop the infection from getting worse.
- **Skin (topical) antibiotics:** You may give you a cream or ointment to put on after soaking and drying the finger or toe.
- **Antibiotic tablets:** If the infection spreads or does not get better, you may need antibiotic tablets to take by mouth.
- **Cut (incision) and drainage:** If pus has built up, a clinician might need to make a small cut in the skin to let it out. We will explain this to you if you need this.
- **Nail removal:** Sometimes the nail needs to be taken off. A new nail will grow back with time.
- **Pain relief:** You can take paracetamol or ibuprofen to help with pain.
- **Keep it raised:** Lifting your finger or toe can help reduce swelling and throbbing.

What do I do at home if I am taking antibiotics?

- **Finish all your antibiotics**, even if you feel better.
- **Stop biting or sucking fingers and nails.**
- **Dry your hands well** after washing. Do not soak them in water unless it is for salt soaks.
- **Avoid wearing gloves** until the infection is gone. They can make your hands sweat.
- **Avoid nail products** (like polish, gel or fake nails) until the infection has been gone for a few weeks.
- **Cut nails carefully.** Do not cut them too short.
- **Wear loose well fitting shoes** if the infection is on your toe.

Caring for your finger or toe after incision and drainage or nail removal

You may have had a numbing injection or spray. When it wears off, you might feel discomfort or pain:

- Take painkillers like paracetamol or ibuprofen. Search for: 'Taking pain relief for an injury after discharge from the Emergency Department' or leaflet number 1238 for more advice.
- Keep your finger or toe raised to help reduce swelling, throbbing and bleeding.
- Keep dressings clean and dry.
- Change the dressing if it gets wet or has a lot of blood. A small patch of blood can be left.

- If you are not sure how to care for it, book an appointment with the nurse at your GP in 3 days.
- If bleeding starts again, press on it with a clean gauze, or clean kitchen roll. Raise the area for 20 minutes. If it does not stop, go back to the Emergency Department. If it has stopped apply a clean dressing.
- Keep doing warm salt soaks as explained on page 2 to help healing. You can start these the next morning.
- We advise keeping the wound dressed to protect it. Remove the dressing during warm water soaks. Keep a dressing on until it has healed and there are no more scabs. There is no set time for this, it could be a couple of weeks.
- Wear well fitting and supporting shoes if it is your toe.
- Avoid sports until it is healed.
- If your nail was removed, it may take 6 to 8 weeks to grow back.
- If you run out of dressings you can get more from your local Pharmacy.

How to change the dressing:

1. Wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, especially your palms and between your fingers.
2. Dry hands with a clean towel/ kitchen roll.
3. Open the dressings but keep them in the packet, as this is clean.
4. Wash your hands again.
5. Carefully take off the dirty dressing. Do not touch the side that was on your wound.
6. If the dressing is stuck, soak with some water and wait for the dressing to loosen. You may need a gentle 'pull'. Do not worry if there is a little fresh blood. Apply gentle pressure and this should stop.
7. Throw away the old dressing. Wash your hands again.
8. Do a warm salt soak. See page 2.
9. If the wound is bleeding press on it with some gauze and raise your finger/toe for 20 minutes to stop it.
10. Pat the area with a clean towel or kitchen roll to dry it. Make sure the wound and surrounding skin are fully dry before applying the new dressing.
11. Put the new dressing on your wound. Do not touch the inside of the new dressing so that it stays clean. Make sure the edges of the dressing are stuck down.



What if I have any problems?

If the finger/toe gets more red, swollen, or painful see your GP.

Only come back to the Emergency Department if:

- You get a fever, feel sick, or are sick.
- You cannot bend your finger properly.
- You took antibiotics but now have a pus collection.
- Had it drained but have pus again.

What if it does not get better?

If it lasts more than 6 weeks, it's called chronic paronychia. There may be other reasons for the infection like a skin condition, or the infection might be caused by a yeast or fungus, rather than bacteria.

We would advise you see your GP if the problem carry's on. You might need:

- an X-ray to check the bone health
- treatment for skin problems
- a referral to a specialist

Contact details

Injuries Unit, Emergency Department: **0116 258 5727**

Fracture clinic: **0116 258 5430**

Switchboard: **0300 303 1573**

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