

HEALTH

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TCM: Fend for your feet

Wearing shoes and socks in summer can create the ideal humid conditions for athlete's foot, or *tinea pedis*, to flourish.

This fungal infection, which usually occurs between the toes, causes scaling, flaking and itching. Blisters and cracked skin may also occur, leading to exposed raw tissue, pain, swelling and inflammation.

Traditional Chinese medicine's holistic health theory maintains that the body is an organic entity, with all parts connected by channels and meridians. As a result, the internal is correlated with the external.

People with athlete's foot usually develop bodily conditions such as damp heat in the local meridians or blood deficiency. Prescriptions boost immunity or eradicate fungal infections.

People with damp heat typically develop blisters in clusters. The lesions leak, are extremely itchy, sting and burn. Sufferers need to expel the damp heat and stop the secretions and irritation.

Those with blood deficiency have dryness, thickness, cracking and peeling on their feet. Lesions may itch but there's no discharge. Sufferers should take a decoction to promote blood production, enhance lubrication of the skin and arrest itchiness.

Athlete's foot comes under the heading "external diseases" in TCM, which refers to problems that can be seen or touched directly, such as superficial infections.

External applications are crucial for eradicating the fungal infection. There are many over-the-counter products available as anti-fungal ointments, lotions, powders or sprays.

Common ingredients in these products are sophora root, cnidium fruit, stemona root, larch bark, realgar and sulphur. If these products are used properly, most infections should respond well.

When there are itchy, burning blisters between the toes, wet dressings and creams can be alternated - for example, applying a gauze dressing soaked in antifungal solution for 15 to 30 minutes first, then an antifungal cream twice daily.

When the blisters dry, keep applying the solution or cream directly on the

area. Fungal infections leading to exposed raw tissue, pain, discharge and inflammation are common, particularly in those whose feet sweat

a lot. For a secondary bacterial infection, antibiotics may also need to be topically applied. Improper application of such drugs may make the situation worse, so a dermatologist should be consulted beforehand.

When the lesions have only thick coarse patches with no itchiness or discharge, the infection is a chronic condition that usually appears in cold and dry seasons. Avoid the solutions for the other types of athlete's foot. Instead, apply specific ointments or creams that have a peeling effect. If necessary, wrap the lesions at night to enhance the softening and peeling effects.

In all cases, treatment should last for four weeks in order to kill all the microorganisms in the superficial layer of the skin. You should do all the usual things such as change your socks every day, let your feet "breathe" and not walk barefoot in public showers or bathing areas. Keep your feet clean and dry them fully after washing.

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Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner