



# How to Avoid Ingrown Toenails

Expert  
Reviewed

Two Parts: [Avoiding Ingrown Toenails](#) [Treating Ingrown Toenails at Home](#)

An ingrown toenail develops when the sides of the nail grow into the surrounding skin, which causes swelling, pain and redness.<sup>[1]</sup> The big toe is most often affected, but it can happen to any toe on your foot. Ingrown toenails often become infected, which leads to more inflammation, tenderness and discharge of a white or yellowish pus. There are a number of strategies that can help you avoid developing ingrown toenails.

Part  
1

## Avoiding Ingrown Toenails

**1 Don't trim your toenails too short.** One of the main causes of ingrown toenails is trimming them too short. If you trim your toenails too short, the pressure put on the ends of your toes while walking (particularly if your shoes are too tight) can drive the sharp edges of the nail into the surrounding tissue.<sup>[2]</sup> As such, keep toenails trimmed to a moderate length — so they're approximately even with the tips of your toes.

- Nails should be cut with a clean, sharp nail trimmer that's made for thicker toenails, instead of the smaller ones that are more appropriate for fingernails.
- Some people's toenails grow faster than others, but plan on trimming them every week or so.
- Poor eyesight, inability to reach your toes due to belly fat, and/or having especially thick nails can make it challenging to properly trim toenails.<sup>[3]</sup>
- If it's too difficult to trim your toenails, make an appointment with a podiatrist (foot specialist).

**2 Trim your toenails straight across.** Another major cause of ingrown toenails is trimming them at angles along the sides to match the rounded shape of your toe, which allows the skin to grow over the nail's sharp edge and get irritated.<sup>[4]</sup> As such, trim them straight across, or tell your pedicurist to do them that way, and you'll greatly reduce your risk of developing ingrown toenails — especially your big toes.

- Picking or tearing at the corners of your toenails can also cause them to become ingrown.<sup>[5]</sup>
- Some people's toenails are naturally curved or fan-shaped, which predisposes them to developing ingrown nails.
- People who have particularly thick toenails have a lesser risk of ingrown toenails because the nails don't piece the surrounding skin as easily as thinner ones.

**3 Wear shoes that fit properly.** Shoes that pinch or place too much pressure on the ends of your toes can also cause a toenail to grow into the surrounding tissue and become painful.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, take care to buy and wear properly fitted shoes, especially if the shoes are for sports that involve a lot of running and stopping, such as soccer, basketball, football or tennis.

- If you're unsure what size of shoes to wear, ask an experienced salesperson for a proper measurement/fitting and some advice about which types are best for the shape of your foot.
- Wearing socks that are too thick can also crowd your toes and increase the risk of toe trauma and ingrown toenails.
- Shoes that are overly loose and too big can increase the risk of ingrown nails, especially in the big toe because of it sliding around too much while walking and running.

**4 Consider wearing protective footwear.** If your work puts you at significant risk of injuring your toes, then wear protective footwear, such as special steel-toed shoes or boots.<sup>[7]</sup> Such shoes or boots will protect all of your toes from trauma, which increases the risk of ingrown and lost toenails — as most badly injured/bruised nails get discolored and simply fall off.

- Jobs that warrant steel-toed shoes/boots include: construction worker, factory worker, mechanic, welder,

fireman and park ranger.

- Always buy shoes and boots made of breathable material, such as leather and suede, because sweaty feet makes the skin around your toenails soft and easier to pierce.<sup>[8]</sup> In addition, wearing socks that help wick moisture away from the feet are helpful as well.

**5 Be careful not to stub your toes.** Trauma to the ends of your toes typically causes swelling, which pushes the soft tissue into the edges of the sharp nails and increases the risk of ingrown toenails.<sup>[9]</sup> As such, be careful walking around your home and consider wearing some hard toed slippers or "house shoes" for added protection just in case.

- The legs of tables, chairs and beds are the most commonly stubbed pieces of furniture.
- The big toe and the smallest (5th) toe are the ones most likely to get stubbed and injured.
- Other preventative measures include making sure your floor is free of clutter, removing slippery rugs, and wearing your glasses or contacts if you need them to see clearly.

**6 See a podiatrist on occasion.** If you have trouble properly taking care of your feet/toenails or if you have diabetes, see a physician or podiatrist for help and treatment on a regular basis (every three to six months).<sup>[10]</sup> Diabetes leads to poor circulation and reduced sensation in the feet, which hampers your ability to feel if your toes are inflamed or if your shoes are too tight. Your podiatrist can make special shoes or orthotics (shoe inserts) that accommodate your feet and reduce the risk of toe trauma and ingrown toenails.

- With diabetes, an ingrown toenail can become easily infected and then turn into a foot ulcer (difficult-to-heal open sore).<sup>[11]</sup>
- Foot ulcers increase the risk of gangrene, which involves the death of tissue from lack of blood circulation.
- Although people who give pedicures can often help with toenail trimming, they are no substitute for professionally trained foot specialists.

## Part 2

### Treating Ingrown Toenails at Home

**1 Soak your foot in warm water.** Ingrown toenails should be treated at home as soon as they are recognized (before infection sets in), in order to prevent complications and the need for medical treatment. One of the easiest methods is to soak the affected foot in warm water for between 15–20 minutes, three to four times daily.<sup>[12]</sup> Soaking can reduce swelling and relieve tenderness.

- Consider adding some Epsom salt to your foot bath. It can help disinfect your ingrown toe and help soothe the pain and inflammation.
- If your ingrown toe is still inflamed after the foot bath, apply an ice cube to it for about five minutes. The ice will numb the pain and combat the inflammation.

**2 Apply some antibiotic cream.** Apply antibiotic cream, lotion or ointment to your ingrown toe at least a couple of times per day, particularly just before you go to bed in the evening.<sup>[13]</sup> After the cream has absorbed into the soft tissue surrounding the toenail, apply a bandage. Make sure to change the bandage each time you apply the antibiotic ointment.

**3 Take over-the-counter (OTC) medication.** If your ingrown toenail is particularly inflamed and/or painful, then consider taking some OTC medication for a few days. Anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) are likely best if you notice lots of swelling.<sup>[14]</sup> Painkillers (also called analgesics) are likely better for pain without much swelling. The most common OTC painkiller is acetaminophen (Tylenol, Paracetamol).

- Anti-inflammatories and analgesics should always be considered short-term strategies for pain control. Taking too many of them at a time or taking them for too long increases your risk of stomach, kidney and liver problems or even organ failure if taken in large quantities.<sup>[15]</sup>
- If you have chronic kidney disease, heart failure, high blood pressure or stroke, or if you are taking anticoagulants, do not take ibuprofen or other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories.
- You can also try rubbing a cream/lotion/ointment that contains a natural pain reliever into your sore toe. Menthol, camphor, arnica and capsaicin are all helpful for relieving tenderness.

**4 Place a cotton ball or dental floss under your ingrown toenail.** After soaking your toenail in warm water and softening it up, put a piece of cotton ball or waxed dental floss under its ingrown edge.<sup>[16]</sup> This will relieve the pressure on the surrounding skin and help the toenail grow above the edge of the skin. Try wetting the cotton with water and some antibiotic cream first before inserting.

- Do not attempt this remedy unless directed to do so by a podiatry specialist.
- Consider putting some coconut oil on the inflamed skin beforehand to soften the skin and help reduce the swelling. The cotton or dental floss will then slide under the nail easier.
- Change the cotton or dental floss on a daily basis to keep the area antiseptic and to prevent a bacterial infection.

### Tips

- There is a difference between toenail clippers and fingernail clippers. Toenail clippers are much bigger and sturdier than normal fingernail clippers.
- If you're dealing with an ingrown toe, consider wearing open-toed shoes or sandals until your toe feels better.
- If your ingrown nail doesn't heal entirely or keeps coming back, your doctor or podiatrist may remove part of the nail.<sup>[17]</sup>

### Warning

- See your family doctor or podiatrist if your ingrown toenail doesn't get better (or gets worse) with three days or so.
- The advice in this article should not be considered a substitute for medical treatment, diagnosis, or advice from your doctor.

### Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Ingrown-toenail/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
2. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/ingrown-toenails/basics/prevention/con-20019655>
3. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001237.htm>

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