

# Fingernail Infection - Bacterial

## Definition

- Mild bacterial infection of the skin fold next to the fingernail

## Health Information

### Symptoms

- Redness and swelling of the skin next to the fingernail
- Usually involves just one small part of the skin fold
- The red area is painful and tender
- The redness comes out over a few days
- A pus pocket (large pimple) may occur
- The medical name is acute paronychia

### Causes

- Normally the nail plate (fingernail) and the skin fold forms a tight seal. The cuticle is a strip of dead skin cells. It seals the nail groove (the space between the skin and nail plate). It acts to fill this gap.
- If this seal is broken, it provides an entry for germs. Staph is the most common germ to infect the area.
- A hangnail is a loose piece of cuticle. Picking at, pulling or chewing a hangnail often starts the problem.
- Nail biting is another trigger.
- For teenagers, frequent manicures or using sculptured nails can cause this.

## Care Advice

### 1. Overview:

- This is a mild infection of the cuticle (skin fold around the fingernail).
- It is usually caused by bacteria.
- Pulling at hangnails or other injury to the cuticle often starts the process.
- Usually, it can be treated at home.
- Here is some care advice that should help.

### 2. Warm Soaks:

- Soak the infected finger in warm water and an antibacterial soap.
- Soak for 10 minutes.
- Repeat 3 times per day until infection is gone.

### 3. Antibiotic Ointment:

- Use an antibiotic ointment (OTC) to the area 3 times per day.
- Cover it with a Bandaid.
- Keep doing this until the redness and pain are gone.

### 4. Antibiotic by Mouth:

- If the infection is spreading, your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic.
- The drug will kill the germs that are causing the infection.
- Give the drug as ordered.
- Try not to forget any of the doses.

5. **Pain:**
  - To help with the pain, give acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) OR ibuprofen. Use as needed.
6. **Pus Pocket Drainage:**
  - Pus pockets need to be opened and drained.
  - Drainage is safer if done by a doctor.
  - If the pus pocket is small and your doctor wants you to open it, here's how:
    - Use a needle. First, clean it with rubbing alcohol.
    - Make a large hole through the center of the pimple.
    - Help the pus come out with gentle pressure.
    - Throw away the needle and all the pus.
    - Keep using an antibiotic ointment 3 times per day.
7. **Prevention of Recurrent Fingernail Infections:**
  - Do not pick at or chew loose pieces of cuticle (hangnails). Instead, cut them off with nail clippers.
  - If your child is a nail biter, help him give up this bad habit.
  - For teens, avoid frequent manicures.
8. **What to Expect:**
  - With proper treatment, this mild infection should clear up in 3 days.
  - Sometimes, the redness will turn into a large pimple or pus pocket.
  - If this occurs, contact your child's doctor to drain the pus.

## Call Your Doctor If

- Pus pocket appears
- Spreading redness occurs
- Fever occurs
- Not gone by day 4
- You think your child needs to be seen
- Your child becomes worse

### Pediatric Care Advice

**Author:** Barton Schmitt MD, FAAP

**Copyright 2000-2022** Schmitt Pediatric Guidelines LLC

**Disclaimer:** This health information is for educational purposes only. You the reader assume full responsibility for how you choose to use it. The information contained in this handout should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. Listing of any resources does not imply an endorsement.