

There Is Fungus Among Us

Believe it or not, fungus lives all over our bodies as part of what we call "normal flora," which also includes bacteria. Normal flora benefits us by fighting off *unwanted* microorganisms. But if an environment is created that favors the growth of one type of normal flora over another, then an infection develops.

Fungal infections on our skin are usually caused by one of two types of fungus: "Tinea" and "candida." Those caused by Tinea are named according to what part of the body is affected, e.g., tinea cruris (groin, AKA "jock itch"), tinea pedis ("athlete's foot"), tinea manuum (hand), tinea capitis (scalp), and tinea corporis (generally elsewhere on the body).

To treat a fungal infection, you need an antifungal medicine - usually topical (and usually prescription), but an oral one is needed if it is widespread, severe or stubborn. But equal in importance to the medicine is creating an environment *unfavorable* to its growth. To do so, you must understand two things about fungus: It loves humidity, and it is sticky. You must keep the areas as cool and dry as possible, and no matter how much you scrub, you cannot get rid of it. In fact, the more you scratch or scrub, the more you damage the skin, and the deeper it digs in and the worse it gets (that is one of the main reasons you should avoid scratching - besides to prevent a secondary bacterial infection).

As such, I tell my patients to treat fungal infections by going through the following ritual morning and night (and sometimes a third application is needed in the middle of the day):

1. Wash and dry the area(s) thoroughly. But to avoid damaging the skin, **this must be done gently!** Since fungal infections almost always itch, the temptation is to think, "You want thorough? I can give you thorough!" And you go to town with the washcloth and towel. Instead, you must use soap and water applied with your hands only (but not fingernails!), and then pat and fan dry.
2. After making the area cool and dry by fanning, imagine the fungus barely hanging on for dear life, screaming out, "I can't live like this!" Then you slap some antifungal cream on there and deliver death and destruction. The nighttime application is perhaps the most valuable, since during the night you are cooler, drier, and move around less - the cream can work better since you are not sweating and rubbing it off.
3. Following the application of the cream with some absorbent medicated powder such as Gold Bond® or Ammens® may be helpful.

Unfortunately, fungal infections may take weeks to cure, and once you have one, there is a higher chance of recurrence. But understanding fungus a little better and following the above principles should help you win the fungus wars.

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