

Facing up to fungal infections

At some time in our lives, almost every one of us will be confronted with a fungal infection. Fortunately, they only rarely occur on the face; but they do appear in most other parts of the body – from head to toe, especially the toe.

Tinea on the toes and elsewhere on the foot – commonly called “athlete’s foot” – is probably the best known of all the fungal infections. It’s caused by a group of fungi called “dermatophytes”. Areas of the body other than the feet can be affected. Fungal nail infections which are notoriously difficult to treat are generally caused by this kind of fungus.

Other forms of fungal infections are caused by yeasts and moulds. The infection known as candidiasis, or thrush, is caused by the *Candida* species of yeasts. *Candida* infections may be easily confused with other fungal infections such as tinea or bacterial infections such as impetigo or even non-infectious skin problems such as eczema or psoriasis.

Candidiasis commonly affects those parts of the body where skin rubs against skin, especially if the environment is warm and moist. If the patient – man, woman or child – is overweight or obese, the risk is even greater still. So, the areas where you are likely to see those beastly yeasts multiply (or rather where you would like to avoid seeing them), are the groin, under the breasts, the armpits and maybe beneath the beer gut.

Candidiasis of the skin usually responds well to topical treatments. Products containing nystatin are effective but the broader spectrum imidazoles (such as *Canesten*, *Clonea*, *Daktarin*, *Mycospor*, *Nizoral*, *Pevaryl* or *Resolve*) will be a better choice if infection with dermatophytes (tinea) is also suspected.

If the area is inflamed or itchy, a combination of one of the imidazole antifungals plus hydrocortisone might be useful (products such as *Hydrozole* or *Resolve Plus* which are available directly from your pharmacist). In most cases of nappy rash, *Candida* infection is present, so one of these creams is an appropriate treatment.

A regular routine associated with nappy changes will help reduce the risk of thrush infection: change nappies frequently and do not use plastic overpants or nappy liners which prevent the skin from drying; use a soap substitute and dispersible oil for bathing; use a damp cloth or baby wipes that do not contain alcohol; and apply an emollient such as zinc and castor oil cream after each nappy change – your pharmacist can recommend a suitable product.

Oral thrush is also common in babies; but not only babies. Older people (with a less competent immune system) and denture wearers are at increased risk, as are smokers and people with a chronic dry mouth condition. People who use so-called corticosteroid preventer puffers for asthma may also be at risk if the mouth is not rinsed properly after using the puffer.

Various antifungal gels and drops are available to treat oral thrush. If dry mouth is a trigger factor, then saliva stimulatory products will be useful. Specially formulated mouthwashes, gels, gums and toothpaste can help. Oral thrush in adults can sometimes be a sign of a more serious underlying condition; so it needs to be investigated.

Vaginal thrush can be particularly uncomfortable, and recurrence is common. Creams and pessaries are available to treat vaginal thrush; and they come in seven day, three day or single dose therapy. The single dose treatments are usually only effective for the first or infrequent episodes. A single dose oral treatment (fluconazole) is now also available and may be chosen when the topical treatments (creams and pessaries) have not been successful, or if the preference is for oral therapy.

Thrush symptoms can be very distressing but they can be treated effectively and comparatively easily. A summary of the causes, the aggravating factors, the treatment and the self help hints to reduce the risk of re-infection, is printed on the recently updated Fact Card titled *Thrush*.

The card is available from all pharmacies around Australia which provide the Pharmaceutical Society’s Self Care health information. Check out the nearest Self Care pharmacy at www.psa.org.au or phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772.