What is athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot is a rash on the skin of the foot. It is the most common fungalskin infection. There are three main types of athlete's foot. Each type affects different parts of the foot and may look different.

What causes athlete's foot?

Athlete's foot is caused by a fungus that grows on or in the top layer of skin. Fungi (plural of fungus) grow best in warm, wet places, such as the area between the toes.

Athlete's foot spreads easily. You can get it by touching the toes or feet of a person who has it. But most often, people get it by walking barefoot on contaminated surfaces near swimming pools or in locker rooms. The fungi then grow in your shoes, especially if your shoes are so tight that air cannot move around your feet.

If you touch something that has fungi on it, you can spread athlete’s foot to other people—even if you don't get the infection yourself. Some people are more likely than others to get athlete's foot. Experts don’t know why this is. After you have had athlete's foot, you are more likely to get it again.

What are the symptoms?

Athlete’s foot can make your feet and the skin between your toes burn and itch. The skin may peel and crack. Your symptoms can depend on the type of athlete’s foot you have.

Toe web infection usually occurs between the fourth and fifth toes. The skin becomes scaly, peels, and cracks. Some people also may have an infection with bacteria. This can make the skin break down even more.

Moccasin type infection may start with a little soreness on your foot. Then the skin on the bottom or heel of your foot can become thick and crack. In bad cases, the toenails get infected and can thicken, crumble, and even fall out. Fungal infection in toenails needs separate treatment.

Vesicular type infection usually begins with a sudden outbreak of fluid-filled blisters under the skin. The blisters are usually on the bottom of the foot. But they can appear anywhere on your foot. You also can get a bacterial infection with this type of athlete’s foot.
How is athlete's foot diagnosed?

Most of the time, a doctor can tell that you have athlete's foot by looking at your feet. He or she will also ask about your symptoms and any past fungal infections you may have had. If your athlete's foot looks unusual, or if treatment did not help you before, your doctor may take a skin or nail sample to test for fungi.

Not all skin problems on the foot are athlete's foot. If you think you have athlete's foot but have never had it before, it's a good idea to have your doctor look at it.