

Mind your toenail clippers

Trimming too low is one cause of annoying ingrown toenails

Is your toe sore to the touch? Is the skin around the nail puffy or red? An ingrown toenail may be to blame.

[Marc Leonard, MD](#), an OSF HealthCare podiatrist, says it's an issue he sees frequently, but it's one that's easily preventable.

Dr. Leonard says an ingrown toenail is when the nail grows into the skin on the nail's side. Some people get ingrown toenails due to a family history of the problem. They may just have wide toenails, in other words.

For others, it's a product of how you take care of your feet.

"Bicyclists wear very tight shoes. They clip onto the bike. The shoes are very unforgiving," Dr. Leonard says as an example. "The person is getting extra pressure on the side of the toes. It can definitely contribute to ingrown nails."

Dance shoes sometimes have the same effect, he says.

Another culprit: clipping your toenails too low toward the side of the toe. Instead, trim straight across using clippers with a straight, not curved, blade.

Avoiding these risk factors is crucial for people with diabetes, Dr. Leonard warns. While that group is not more prone to ingrown toenails, an occurrence may mean serious complications.

"If their blood sugar is not under control, the infections from ingrown nails can get severe quickly," Dr. Leonard says. "Sometimes there can also be circulation problems with diabetics."

Dr. Leonard says some ingrown toenails will resolve on their own. But if a person has to come to a podiatrist's office, it usually means the site is infected.

"We might trim out the side of the nail. That's the easiest way to treat it," Dr. Leonard says. "In other situations, we have to numb the toe and take out the side of the nail."

If the toe is really inflamed and irritated, he says, a doctor will remove a larger portion of the nail, plus some excess skin and tissue. The person may also be sent home with antibiotic medication to keep the infection down.

For people with frequent ingrown toenails, there's a permanent solution.

"We'll actually kill the side of the nail," Dr. Leonard says. "We'll put a chemical in the base of the toe to kill the root. That eliminates growth of the nail on the side."

That's an outpatient procedure done at a podiatrist's office. And in the days and months ahead, you would trim the nail normally, Dr. Leonard says. The nail would just be narrower.

Regardless of what happens to your toe, recovery from ingrown nail treatment involves rest and soaking the toe in warm water. You should be back to normal activities "fairly quickly," Dr. Leonard says.

One more burning question to answer: how often should I trim my toenails?

"For most people, probably once a month or once every couple weeks," Dr. Leonard suggests. But if you have a history of ingrown toenails or other toe issues, talk to your primary care provider or podiatrist about proper toe care.

Learn more about foot and toe care on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).