

Headline	Bad fungus		
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Bad fungus!

Fungal infections may be a sign of an underlying disorder.

Tell Me About ...

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MY husband recently had a sore throat. At first, he thought it was bacterial in origin, but when he went to the doctor, he was diagnosed to have 'oral thrush'. I have never heard of this. What is it?

Oral thrush is an infection of the mouth and throat caused by *Candida*, a type of yeast. In this infection, thick white patches on a red base can appear on your tongue, palate, gums or elsewhere in the mouth.

You cannot scrape these patches away with a tongue scraper either or they will bleed. Oral thrush can be painful and make it difficult for you to chew, eat or swallow normally.

Why do we get this *Candida* infection?

There are 20 types of *Candida*, and the most common one related to disease is *Candida albicans*.

Oral thrush becomes increasingly common with advancing age. But it can also be a sign of a weakened immune system. Some causes of a weakened immune system are chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment, HIV infection or steroids. People who have diabetes are also prone to this.

I have also seen people who have performed heavy exercise get an oral thrush infection.

Candida doesn't only affect the mouth. It can affect other areas of the skin and even affect organs or enter the bloodstream.

Where else does *Candida* affect us?

First of all, *Candida* are usually present in our bodies. It is only when they become numerous, or when our immune systems become weaker, that they start to cause disease.

On our skins, they like to invade warm, moist areas, such as underarms, diaper areas (especially for babies), under our breasts, nails, folds of our abdomen (especially if we are overweight and have hanging folds) and vagina.

Vagina?! How do I get *Candida* there?

This is quite a common problem, especially if you are pregnant, have diabetes, or are taking oral contraceptives. This infection is more common after menopause.

Candida can also affect other organs, such as the brain, lungs, kidney and heart. This is

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especially common when you have a malignancy or a weakened immune system.

Is it easy to treat Candida?

Yes, it's easy to treat candidiasis, which is the infection caused by Candida.

It can easily be treated by nystatin, which comes in oral formulations, powders or creams. But of course, it's more important to have a thorough medical check-up to determine if there is any underlying sinister cause to the candidiasis.

I have heard that athlete's foot is also caused by a fungus. Is that fungus also Candida?

No. Athlete's foot is caused by a fungus named *Trichophyton rubrum*. It's the commonest fungal skin infection, more common than Candida.

It's actually a rash on the skin of your foot, and you don't necessarily have to be an athlete to get it. This type of fungus likes to grow in wet, warm places, such as the area between your toes.

You can get it by touching the toes or feet of someone who has it. You can get it if you walk barefoot on contaminated surfaces, especially if they are wet, such as in locker rooms (hence the name, athlete's foot) or swimming pool areas.

When you put on your shoes after walking around barefoot on these surfaces, the fungi then grows in your shoes, which usually do not allow much air circulation.

Is athlete's foot always only between my toes? I have a rash on my soles, and I'm not sure what it is. But it sure is itchy.

There are three types of athlete's foot:

The most common is toe web infection, especially between the fourth and fifth toes, because there is not much movement between them – unlike between the first, second and third toes, which are more flexible. Your skin here becomes scaly. It then cracks and peels.

Another type is called the moccasin type, because it affects the area of a moccasin. The skin on the bottom or heel of your foot thickens and cracks. Your toenails can even get infected and fall off.

The last type is called a vesicular type infection. This one involves fluid-filled blisters on your foot. This especially happens on your soles. Bacteria can invade these sore areas at any time and add to the soreness, itchiness and misery.

Is there any cure for athlete's foot?

Of course there is. You can buy antifungal lotions, creams or sprays. If it's bad, you may even need oral antifungal medicines. You have to keep your feet clean and dry.

And next time when you are in locker rooms, you should wear shower sandals or use talcum powder to keep your feet dry.

■ Dr YLM graduated as a medical doctor, and has been writing for many years on various subjects such as medicine, health advice, computers and entertainment. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information contained in this column is for general educational purposes only. Neither The Star nor the author gives any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to such information. The Star and the author disclaim all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.



Fungal nail infection.