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What is ringworm?

Ringworm is a common infection of the skin and nails that is caused by fungus. The infection is called “ringworm” because it can cause an itchy, red, circular rash. Ringworm is also called “tinea” or “dermatophytosis.” The different types of ringworm are usually named for the location of the infection on the body.

Who gets ringworm?

Ringworm is very common. Anyone can get ringworm, but people who have weakened immune systems may be especially at risk for infection and may have problems fighting off an infection. People who use public showers or locker rooms without protective footwear, athletes who participate in contact sports like wrestling, people who wear tight shoes and have excessive sweating, and people who have close contact with animals may also be more likely to come in contact with the fungi that cause ringworm.

How is ringworm spread?

People can get ringworm after skin-to-skin contact or sharing personal items (towels, clothing, bedding, combs, hairbrushes) with someone who has the infection. People can get ringworm after touching an animal that has ringworm. Many different kinds of animals can spread ringworm to people, including dogs and cats, especially kittens and puppies. Other animals, like cows, goats, pigs, and horses can also spread ringworm to people. Infection in animals may not always be obvious. This fungus can also live on surfaces, particularly in damp areas like locker rooms and public showers.

What are the symptoms of ringworm?

Ringworm can affect skin on almost any part of the body, as well as fingernails and toenails. The symptoms of ringworm often depend on which part of the body is infected.

Feet (tinea pedis or “athlete’s foot”):

- Red, swollen, peeling, itchy skin between the toes (especially between the pinky toe and the one next to it).
- The sole and heel of the foot may also be affected. In severe cases, the skin on the feet can blister.

Scalp (tinea capitis):

- Looks like a scaly, itchy, red, circular bald spot.
- The bald spot can grow in size and multiple spots might develop if the infection spreads.
- Ringworm on the scalp is more common in children than adults.

Groin (tinea cruris or “jock itch”):

- Looks like scaly, itchy, red spots, usually on the inner sides of the skin folds of the thigh.

Beard (tinea barbae):

- Symptoms of ringworm on the beard include scaly, itchy, red spots on the cheeks, chin, and upper neck.
- The spots might become crusted over or filled with pus, and the affected hair might fall out.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms typically appear 4 to 14 days after the skin comes in contact with the fungi that cause ringworm.

How is ringworm diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider can usually diagnose ringworm by looking at the affected skin and asking questions about your symptoms. A small skin scraping may be taken to be examined under a microscope or sent to a laboratory for testing.

What is the treatment for ringworm?

The treatment for ringworm depends on how serious the infection is and the location on the body. Some forms of ringworm can be treated with non-prescription (“over-the-counter”) medications, but other forms of ringworm need treatment with prescription antifungal medication.

How can ringworm be prevented?

Prevention of ringworm includes:

- Keeping your skin clean and dry.
- Wearing shoes that allow air to circulate freely around your feet.
- Clipping your fingernails and toenails short and keep them clean.
- Changing your socks and underwear at least once a day.
- Washing your hands with soap and running water after playing with pets. If you suspect that your pet has ringworm, take it to see a veterinarian.
- If you’re an athlete involved in close contact sports:
 - Shower immediately after your practice session or match
 - Keep all of your sports gear and uniforms clean
 - Avoid sharing sports gear (helmet, etc.) with other players.
- Avoid walking barefoot in areas like locker rooms or public showers.
- Avoid sharing clothing, towels, sheets, or other personal items with someone who has ringworm.

How can I learn more about ringworm?

- If you have concerns about ringworm, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. You can find your local health department at vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/.
- Visit the CDC page on ringworm at cdc.gov/ringworm/about/ for more information.

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