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What is an ingrown toenail?

An ingrown toenail is a toenail that grows into the skin of the toe. It causes tenderness, redness, and swelling of skin around the corner of the toenail on one of the big toes. Ingrown toenails are usually caused by tight shoes (for example, cowboy boots) or improper cutting of the toenails. They take several weeks to heal.

How can I take care of my child?

- **Soaking**

Soak the foot twice a day in warm water and antibacterial soap for 20 minutes. While the foot is soaking, massage the swollen part of the cuticle outward.

- **Antibiotic ointment**

If your child's cuticle is just red and irritated, an antibiotic ointment is probably not needed. But if the cuticle becomes swollen or oozes secretions, apply Neosporin ointment (no prescription needed) 5 or 6 times a day.

- **Cutting off the corner of the toenail**

The pain is caused by the corner of the toenail rubbing against the raw cuticle. Therefore, your healthcare provider will cut this corner off so that the irritated tissue can heal more easily. Your healthcare provider needs to do this only once. The main purpose of treatment is to help the nail grow over the nail cuticle rather than get stuck in it. Therefore, during soaks try to bend the corners of the nail upward.

- **Shoes**

Have your child wear sandals or go barefoot as much as possible to prevent pressure on the toenail. When your child must wear closed shoes, protect the ingrown toenail as follows: If the inner edge is involved, tape a foam pad between the first and second toes to keep them from touching. If the outer edge is involved, tape a foam pad to the outside of the ball of the toe to keep the toenail from touching the side of the shoe.

How can I help prevent ingrown toenails?

Make sure that your child's shoes are not too narrow. Get rid of any pointed or tight shoes. After the cuticle is healed, cut the toenails straight across, leaving the corners. Don't cut the nails too short. Cut the nail weekly to prevent pressure on the end of the nail, which can push the corners into the skin. Also, after every shower or bath, lift up the corners of the nail.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Your child develops a fever.
- A red streak spreads beyond the toe.

Call during office hours if:

- Any pus or yellow drainage is not cleared up after 48 hours of treatment.
- The cuticle has not totally healed in 2 weeks.
- You have other concerns or questions.