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Disease Investigation Branch

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Ringworm

(athlete's foot, tinea, dermatomycosis, dermatophytosis)

What is ringworm?

Ringworm is a term used to describe an infection of the skin caused by different types of microscopic fungi. These fungi commonly affect the scalp, skin, nails, and hair. When the fungus affects the feet, the infection is commonly known as **athlete's foot**.

Fungal growth on the skin can produce distinctive ring-like patches with raised borders thought by some to resemble worms; there are no "worms" in ringworm infection, however.

How do you get it?

You can get ringworm by direct skin-to-skin contact with people or pets that are infected. You can also get it indirectly from the backs of theater seats or by sharing personal items such as combs, hairbrushes, hair clippers, or hats contaminated with the fungi. In the case of athlete's foot, you can get it by exposure to floors, shower stalls, or clothing (such as socks) contaminated by an infected person. Anyone can get ringworm, but children under the age of 12 years seem to get it more often (especially ringworm of the scalp).

What are the symptoms?

Ringworm of the scalp commonly begins with small bumps on the head that grow in size and spread out in a circular pattern. The hairs at the site may become brittle and break off, leaving hairless, scaly patches.

Ringworm of the nails is characterized by nails that may become thicker, discolored, brittle, and broken.

Ringworm of the body commonly appears as flat, scaly areas with reddish borders. The lesions may take on a dry and scaly, or sometimes, moist and crusted appearance.

Ringworm of the feet, also known as **athlete's foot**, usually involves inflammation with cracking of the skin that is especially noticeable in the area between the toes. Occasionally, blisters containing a thin watery fluid appear in infected areas.

When do symptoms start?

Ringworm of the scalp commonly appears 10 to 14 days after exposure to the fungus, whereas ringworm of the body generally appears 4 to 10 days after exposure. The incubation period for ringworm of the feet is unknown.

For how long is a person contagious?

A person with ringworm is contagious as long as the infection is still active or for as long as the fungus remains on contaminated materials.

What is the treatment for ringworm?

A doctor can prescribe medications to treat the fungal infection.

Should a person with ringworm infection be excluded from work or school?

No exclusion is needed after effective treatment is started.

How can you keep from getting it?

Avoid sharing personal grooming items (i.e., combs, hairbrushes, hair clippers) or clothing and hats.

Wash towels and clothing with hot water and fungicidal agents. Use fungicidal agents to disinfect floors shared with infected individuals.

Practice good hygiene and bathe frequently. Keep skin areas likely to become infected (such as between the toes, under the arms and between the thighs) clean and dry.