Family Medicine Clerkship
Plain Language Summary

Title: Is it worth using a medicine to treat fungus on your nail?

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Plain Language Summary:

The word fungus often makes people think about moss, mold, or mushrooms, or things growing on rocks and trees. Unfortunately, some kinds of fungi can even grow on the human body. Depending on the type of fungus, an infection could cause big problems making you feel very sick; or it could cause smaller problems that are still annoying. A person might notice itchiness, or maybe the finger or toe nails will start to look "ugly." Toe and finger nails are places some kinds of fungi prefer to live. If they get there, and are able to survive, an infection begins, called "onychomycosis." If this happens, your nails might start to change color, become thick, change shape, or even split open. It might become hard for you to clip your own nails, making you have to see a doctor for help. When fungus starts to live in your nail, you might also start to have pain at this site.

Half of all nail disorders are caused by fungi. This means if you start to notice unpleasant changes to your nails, there is a good chance a fungus is involved. If you have diseases like diabetes, HIV, or other immune system disorders, your risks will be worse. There are ways to treat nail fungus, though. One way is by medicines called "antifungals." Some antifungals are taken by mouth, and some are put on the nail; be sure to check which way to use it!

Not everybody will find that taking the antifungal is worthwhile. Infection often returns when a medicine is stopped. And taking medicine can cause problems for some people; sometimes these problems could be even worse than the infection. On top of this, medicine costs money. Because fungal nail problems usually are not serious, insurance companies usually will not pay for this medicine. Some of these medicines are expensive.

A common way doctors try to treat nail fungus is by removing the nail. The nail will grow back after about 10 months, unless the doctor does a procedure to stop the nail from growing anymore. Scientists studied what happens to nails when they grow back, and found that people who had their toenails removed tended to feel better about their feet. There were fewer nail problems noticed when they grew back, too. However, with time, the fungus will return. The infection might not be as bad as before, but patients will often decide to repeat this process.

Some scientists did a study to see if adding an antifungal to the nail removal would help prevent return of the fungus. They found that most people who did both treatments did not have an infection, when check about a year later. This means that if a patient wants to cure their problem, combining nail removal with a medicine might be their best bet. The scientists did not look at what happens further than a year out.

Whether a treatment is right for you depends on if you feel it is worth the money, and if you are willing to accept some risks. If you are interested, you can ask your doctor for advice on whether treating your infection, or leaving it will be best for you.

If you still have questions, you can get more information here:

Mayo Clinic:
www.mayoclinic.com/health/nail-fungus/DS00084

Medscape:
http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1105828-overview

National Institute of Health:
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002306/

Key Words:

Fungus
Antifungal
Onychomycosis
Nail
Toenail