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Ingrown Nail

What is an ingrown nail?

An ingrown nail is a term describing a corner of a nail growing into the surrounding skin. This can lead to skin redness and irritation along the skin border. This is usually felt when there is pressure on that side of the nail caused by socks, shoes, other toes, or bedsheets. Ingrown nails can also become infected, which often necessitate addressing the nail as well as the infection.

What can cause an ingrown nail?

Ingrown nails are often the result of external forces (tight fitting shoes, types of recreation, etc.) that push the nail into the skin. Structural deformities of the toe, including bunions and hammer toes, can also cause abnormal forces at the skin/nail interface. Nail dystrophy (different nail growth) due to nail injury or fungal nail infections can also cause a nail to grow curved or thickened, which can ultimately lead to an ingrown nail.

Treatments:

The first line of treatment is alleviating pressure. Patients will often notice improvement in symptoms when wearing sandals, which reduces external forces on the nail. If there is an infection present, treating the infection is the most important treatment goal. This is often achieved with both topical (skin) and oral antibiotics, as well as soaking to help draw out the infection. If an abscess (collection of pus or fluid) is present along the skin edge, this often needs to be drained to both alleviate tension on the skin as well as provide a means for draining the infection. If there is no infection, alleviating pressure and allowing local tissue swelling to resolve is the most appropriate treatment course. If these conservative treatment regimens don't work, a nail avulsion is a common, quick, and reliable treatment that can be performed in the office. This usually involves numbing the toe and removing the nail that has grown into the skin.

Prevention:

Shoes with a wider toe box may be one easy solution. This will often prevent pressure on the nail/skin border leading to an ingrown. It is also important to let the nail grow a little longer than usual. Cutting the nail too short can lead to surrounding skin overgrowth and obstruction of nail development. Lastly, not cutting the edge back too far can also help prevent ingrown nails. It is natural to want to cut the nail back if irritation is felt, but the appropriate action would be to alleviate pressure and allow the edge of the nail to grow longer (past skin fold).