WHAT IS IT?
Onychomycosis is a fungal infection of the nails. It is the most common nail disease in adults. Toenails are more likely to be infected than fingernails. Because fungi like warm, moist environments, the inside of a shoe is a perfect place for fungi to grow.

WHAT CAUSES IT?
Onychomycosis is caused by 3 main classes of fungi: dermatophytes (fungi that specifically infect hair, skin, and nails), yeasts, and nondermatophyte molds. Dermatophytes are the most common cause of toenail onychomycosis, whereas yeast is more likely to infect fingernails.

Frequent exposure of hands and feet to moisture increases the risk of developing a fungal infection. Typically, a fungal infection will start on the skin, then spread to and invade the underside of an adjacent nail. A common example is someone with “athlete’s foot” (a fungal infection of the foot) who develops a toenail infection.

Fungal infections are the cause of abnormal appearing nails in only about 50-60% of cases. Trauma, psoriasis, eczematous conditions, iron deficiency, and other conditions may have similar symptoms.

IS IT CONTAGIOUS?
Nail fungus is not highly contagious. It can be transmitted from person to person but only with constant intimate contact.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?
Onychomycosis usually begins as a white or yellow spot on the nail that spreads, causing discoloration and thickening of the nail. Sometimes the nail surface becomes soft and may split or crumble. Eventually the nail may separate from the underlying nail bed.

Mild symptoms generally lead to cosmetic problems only. However, if a toenail becomes severely thickened and presses against the inside of a shoe, it can cause significant pain and irritation.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?
Onychomycosis is often diagnosed simply by its appearance. A nail scraping can be performed and examined under the microscope to confirm the presence of fungi. Nail samples may also be sent to the laboratory for a fungal culture. If positive, this test will identify the specific fungus causing the infection.

HOW IS IT TREATED?
Nail infections are difficult to treat, and recurrence is common. The choice of treatment varies based on the severity of symptoms and how much the infection bothers you.
- Treatment may not be necessary if symptoms are mild or not very bothersome. An untreated nail infection is unlikely to resolve on its own, but it’s also unlikely to cause any long-term problems.
- If treatment is desired, antifungal drugs are the mainstays of therapy.

ANTIFUNGAL MEDICATIONS
Improvement with antifungal therapy usually takes months. This is because nails grow out slowly (4-6 months for fingernails and 12-18 months for toenails). Even when therapy works, the fungus may return. Both topical and oral antifungal treatments are available.