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**TOP TIPS FOR WINTER**

# What is this information guide about?

* Protection against cold and chill
* Dangers of skin and extremity damage
* Factors that can accelerate the problem

# The condition

Official names: Perniosis (chilblains), chilling leading to skin damage. Blisters, erosions, ulcers, ischaemia and necrosis (gangrene).

# Who is this aimed at?

All children, active adults, elderly and infirm, those with medical conditions likely to be at greater risk. The young may be unware of the dangers of cold. Active adults include cyclists, skiers, hikers. Older patients may cut their heating down to save on bills. Cold drafts in older properties are a prime cause for chilling. This becomes a social issue and support should come from the Council or Social Services when economics is challenged. Families also carry the burden of responsibility for their older relatives.

# Things you need to know

Exposure can arise at any time of year not just winter (in the UK Dec-Mar). Cold wet environments include mud bound music festivals, climbing mountains and high peaks.

Blood vessels narrow and so carry less oxygen and heat, but when the skin is heated, the reverse happens and as vessels widen the skin becomes damaged. With chilblains this forms itching and a dark red colour. If the skin is chilled however damage is sustained and may have darker colours of blue, red, black. Thick socks can cause enough pressure within shoes to limit circulation to your toes and so doubling up on thick socks should be avoided. The ‘toe wiggle test’ should allow freedom of movement inside the shoe.

Select wool over cotton because cotton can become cold and is not as beneficial as wool fibres which both repel and absorb water.

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# General

Some people are more at risk of chilblains than others and include people with poor circulation. That means diabetics, smokers, blood disorders such as anaemias, blood clotting problems with too many clotting cells (platelets). People with diabetes may not be able to feel their feet and could have infected chilblains or sores without realising it.

Specific skin conditions such as [lupus](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/immune-system/lupus) – a long-term condition that causes swelling in the body's tissues, and [Raynaud's phenomenon](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/heart-and-blood-vessels/conditions/raynauds-phenomenon/) – a common condition that affects the blood supply to certain parts of the body, usually the fingers and toes.

Chilblains can also occur on areas of the feet exposed to pressure, such as a [bunion](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/conditions/bunion/) or a toe being squeezed by tight or poorly fitting shoes.

***Chemicals that affect blood vessels***: Nicotine (tobacco) constricts blood vessels as does caffeine. Alcohol has the opposite effect. Use NHS cessation advice for smoking and consider avoiding alcohol when exposed to low temperature before activities commence. [Click on smoking cessation advice](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/nhs-stop-smoking-services-help-you-quit/).

# Prevention

* Start with better health. A poor diet or low body weight needs correcting. If you are in this group, you may not notice how you look.
* Thin skin and less fat exposes you to a poor ability to fight cold. Eat at least one hot meal during the day – this will help warm your whole body, particularly in cold weather
* Avoid tight shoes and boots – these can restrict the circulation to your toes and feet

# If you're susceptible to chilblains, you can reduce your risk by warming the skin gradually. Heating the skin too quickly will add to the misery of chilblains.

* Warm your shoes on the radiator before you put them on and always make sure damp shoes are dry before you wear them.
* Keep your house well heated – try to keep one room in the house warm and avoid drafts
* Foot insoles can prevent the cold from getting in through the sole. Select shoes and footwear with good insulating properties. Traditional wellies are not as good as leather and lined boots. Water proof materials now include Gortex, so leather is not always a first choice.
* When purchasing socks specifically for warmth, the most important factor to look at is what shoes you plan on wearing with them. Thicker soled boots do not require thick socks.

# Treatment\*\*

Chilblains often get better on their own but the effect of chilling may leave other problems.

It may help to use a soothing lotion, such as calamine or witch hazel, to relieve itching. Your pharmacist may also be able to recommend a suitable product.

If your chilblains are severe and keep returning, speak to your GP. They may recommend taking a daily tablet or capsule of a medication called nifedipine. This works by relaxing the blood vessels, improving your circulation. Nifedipine can be used to help existing chilblains heal, or can be taken during the winter to stop them developing.

If you have severe or recurring chilblains, there's a small risk of further problems developing, such as:

* infection from blistered or scratched skin
* ulcers forming on the skin
* permanent discolouration of the skin
* scarring of the skin

It's often possible to avoid these complications by:

* not scratching or rubbing the affected areas of skin
* not directly overheating the chilblains (by using hot water, for example)
* You can also help reduce your risk of infection by cleaning any breaks in your skin with antiseptic and covering the area with an antiseptic dressing. The dressing should be changed every other day until the skin heals.
* If the skin does become infected, [antibiotics](https://www.nhsinform.scot/tests-and-treatments/medicines-and-medical-aids/types-of-medicine/antibiotics/) may be prescribed to treat the infection.

**\*\*** Much of the information above has been taken directly from [NHS Scotland](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/skin-hair-and-nails/chilblains) and provides good advice and is unlikely to be bettered.

# Specialised Sports

The curse of cold feet can reduce enjoyment no matter what activity.

### **Hiking**

Wear warm clothes and insulate your hands, feet and legs – wearing long johns, long boots, tights, leg warmers or long socks will help. It is a good idea to wear a clean pair of socks if you get cold feet in bed.

Strap wet socks to the outside of a back pack if you hike or use a hand dryer to help absorb some moisture.

Moisturise your feet to stop them drying out and the skin cracking to increase skin strength and better pliability.

### **Skiing**

### Don’t skimp on quality socks. Select socks designed to remove sweat away from the skin and trap heat. Padded socks can also protect shins and the achilles tendon. A mix of artificial and natural fibres such as merino wool, bamboo or silk are effective in creating a ‘wick’ effect which will insulate and allow skin to remain dry.

Ensure snowboarding and ski shoes/boots are professionally fitted and use insoles with a reflective layer designed to retain heat and keep out cold. Swap socks and always make sure you have a dry pair.

Drying boots can be assisted by electric dryers or silica gel beads to absorb moisture, drying without the need for power or heat.

**Cycling**

Cycling shoes soon become cold in winter. Use special cycling socks for insulation and ensure the shoe is not tight. Socks should be water proof and insulating and available from all good cycle specialists. A neoprene cover adds to the warmth and prevents damp. Hands should be gloved and the face and ears as well as eyes protected.

# Further information & disclaimer

Thanks for reading this information sheet. This factsheet is intended as a guide. Please read the original blog December 2018 in Footlocker

David Tollafield is an author and footcare journalist as well as a qualified podiatrist and former podiatric surgeon. More information sheets are availableto download.Please sign-up to my website [consultingfootpain.co.uk](http://consultingfootpain.co.uk/). for further information on foot health problems or leave comments.

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**About the information in this guide**

Information has been taken from official sites such as NHS Scotland and adapted. Some of the advice on skiing has come from an article influenced by podiatrist Lorraine Jones and published in the Jan.2018 Telegraph. NHS Choices <https://www.nhs.uk/pages/home.aspx>

**Products to help against the effects of chilling**

Internet sites are accessible to purchase many products to help with chilling and insulation. Due to the wide choice available I have chosen to leave such selection to the reader but would be delighted to hear from anyone who has a ‘patient experience’ with any product. Write to myfootjourneys@mail.com

