Chronic Paronychia
Causes and treatments

What is chronic paronychia?

Chronic paronychia is inflammation (redness, swelling, and tenderness) of the skin around a fingernail or toenail. It is most common in the fold of skin called the proximal nail fold that the nail grows out from.

Chronic paronychia occurs when the cuticle is injured. The cuticle is the strip of hard skin around the base of the nail. It seals the proximal nail fold onto the nail plate. When the cuticle loses its seal, water and irritants can get under the proximal nail fold. This can cause irritation and form a wet “cave.” Germs can grow in this cave and keep the cuticle from reattaching to the nail plate.

Apply a solution of 15% sulfacetamide in 50% ethanol. This solution dries up the water in the cave and keeps germs from growing. The water dissolves in the ethanol and the ethanol evaporates.
Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

Dermatology Center:
206-598-5065

How to apply the solution:

- Put 1 to 2 drops at the base of the nail so that it flows under your proximal nail fold. A drop will fill the “cave” that the nail fold makes around the nail. Do not try to push the drops under your nail fold.
- Do this 4 times a day and every time your hands get wet.
- Do not get this solution on top of your proximal nail fold. It will irritate your skin.

- Apply tacrolimus (Protopic) or fluocinonide (Fluonex, Lidex) ointment. These ointments treat the inflammation of the proximal nail fold.

How to apply the ointment:

- Apply a small amount to the skin of the nail fold 2 times a day. Use a dab that is smaller than a grain of rice. A little bit goes a long way.
- It should not take long to rub completely into the skin.
- Do not get the ointment under your proximal nail fold. It will collect there and keep the area wet, which allows germs to grow.

What else can I do?

- Protect your nail fold from irritants. Some common irritants are:
  - Harsh detergents
  - Juice from fresh fruits such as apples, oranges, lemons, and limes
  - Juice from fresh garlic or onion
  - Juice from fresh vegetables that are acidic, such as tomatoes
- Do not use synthetic exam gloves or finger cots directly on your skin.
- Wear thin cotton gloves under rubber gloves when you wash dishes or do work that might get your nails wet. The rubber gloves will protect your skin from the irritants, and the cotton gloves will protect your skin from the rubber gloves.

   You can buy cotton gloves at department stores, cosmetics counters, pharmacies, camera shops, online, or by mail order. Get a few pairs. Ask for our handout “White Cotton Gloves” for more information on where to buy cotton gloves.

When will my nail grow again?

Your nail is affected by the inflammation in the proximal nail fold. When the cuticle reattaches and the inflammation goes away, the nail will grow normally. It takes about 6 months for a fingernail to grow out all the way.