SYMPTOM

Clubbing of the fingers or toes

Clubbing is painless rounding and widening of the fingertips or toes with increased nail curve.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
My fingertips look rounded and my nails curve downward

WHERE IT IS FELT
Fingertips, nail beds, and sometimes toes

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Inherited traits, chronic lung disease, inflammatory bowel disease

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New clubbing with worsening breathlessness or persistent fever

USUALLY LASTS
Long-term unless the underlying cause improves

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Finger or toe changes are new, unexplained, or worsening

Overview

Clubbing is a change in the shape of the ends of the fingers or toes. The tips become wider and rounder, while the nails curve more than usual. The skin around the nails may look shiny.

Clubbing is usually painless and develops slowly. It is a physical sign rather than a disease. Some people inherit it or have it without an identified health problem. In other people, it is linked with a condition affecting the lungs, heart, digestive system, or liver.

New clubbing should be assessed even if you otherwise feel well. The timing and any other symptoms help determine how soon you need care.

What it may feel or look like

Early clubbing can be subtle. The nail bed may feel softer or springier when pressed. As the change progresses:

One informal check is the "window test." Place the back surfaces of matching fingers together so the nails face each other. A small diamond-shaped gap normally appears between the nail

beds. In clubbing, this gap may be reduced or absent. This test cannot confirm the cause, and normal differences in nail shape can affect the result.

Clubbing often affects both hands. It may also affect the toes. Changes limited to one finger, one hand, or one side of the body are less typical and should be examined.

- The fingertip may become broader or more rounded
- The nail may curve downward from front to back
- The angle between the nail and surrounding skin may become less distinct
- Rings may feel tighter because the fingertip has widened

Common causes

Clubbing is thought to involve increased blood flow and changes in tissue beneath the nails. The reason this happens differs between conditions.

Inherited or unexplained clubbing: Some people have clubbed fingers from childhood, especially when other family members have the same feature. Tests may not find an underlying illness. This is called idiopathic clubbing, meaning clubbing without a known cause.

Lung conditions: Acquired clubbing is often associated with lung disease. Possible causes include bronchiectasis, which is long-term widening and scarring of the airways; pulmonary fibrosis, which is lung scarring; cystic fibrosis; lung infection or abscess; and lung cancer. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, does not usually cause clubbing by itself.

Heart conditions: Clubbing can occur with some heart conditions present from birth, particularly those that reduce oxygen levels in the blood. It may also develop with infective endocarditis, an infection of the heart's inner lining or valves.

Digestive and liver conditions: Inflammatory bowel disease, including Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, may be associated with clubbing. Less common links include coeliac disease and advanced liver disease.

Rare causes include certain thyroid disorders and blood vessel problems. When clubbing appears in only one limb or digit, a local problem affecting blood flow may be considered.

When to seek medical care

Book a routine appointment if you notice new or gradually increasing clubbing, even if it is painless. You should also arrange an assessment if clubbing is present in only one finger, hand,

foot, or side of the body.

Seek same-day medical care if new clubbing occurs with:

Call emergency services for severe difficulty breathing, blue or grey lips, fainting, confusion, or chest pain that is severe or does not settle. Coughing up more than small streaks of blood also needs emergency assessment.

Clubbing alone, without sudden or severe symptoms, is not usually an emergency.

- Worsening shortness of breath
- Persistent fever or night sweats
- Coughing up blood
- A new or persistent cough
- Unexplained weight loss
- Painful, swollen joints or tender lower arms or legs

How the cause is found

A clinician will examine the nails, fingertips, and toes. They may ask when the changes started, whether relatives have similar fingers, and whether you have breathing, heart, bowel, or general symptoms.

Your heart and lungs may be examined, and the oxygen level in your blood may be checked with a small finger sensor. The presence of clubbing does not show which condition, if any, is responsible.

Tests depend on your history and examination. They may include blood tests, a chest X-ray, lung function testing, or other imaging. Heart tests or digestive-system investigations may be appropriate when symptoms point in those directions. Not everyone needs every test.

Treatment and self-care

There is no specific home treatment that reverses clubbing. Care focuses on identifying and treating any underlying condition. Depending on the cause, this might involve treating an infection, managing long-term inflammation, or arranging specialist care for a lung, heart, or digestive disorder.

Avoid picking or cutting the skin around curved nails. Keep nails trimmed, wear well-fitting shoes if your toes are affected, and use gloves for work that could injure the fingertips.

If you smoke, support to stop can reduce your risk of several lung and heart conditions, although smoking itself does not explain every case of clubbing.

What to expect

Clubbing usually develops over months or longer. It may improve gradually when an underlying condition is successfully treated, but this is not guaranteed. Long-standing changes can remain even after health improves.

Inherited or unexplained clubbing may stay stable and need no treatment once other causes have been considered. Follow-up depends on the suspected cause, test results, and whether you develop new symptoms.

Common questions

Is clubbing the same as curved nails?

No. Nails can curve because of normal variation, ageing, repeated injury, or nail disease. True clubbing also changes the tissue and shape of the fingertip.

Can clubbing happen without illness?

Yes. It may run in families or occur without an identified cause. New changes still deserve an assessment before this conclusion is made.

Does clubbing mean cancer?

No. Cancer is one possible cause, but clubbing has many other explanations. Its appearance alone cannot diagnose cancer or any other condition.

Is clubbing painful?

Clubbing itself is usually painless. Pain, warmth, joint swelling, or tenderness along the lower arms or legs may suggest an associated condition that needs prompt assessment.

Can it affect only the toes?

Yes, although this is less common. Clubbing limited to the toes or to one side may change which causes are considered.

Sources

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