Q: I have heard that Vicks VapoRub can be helpful in curing toenail fungus. This sounds bizarre! Is there any truth to this?

A: Many people with nail fungus say that applying Vicks VapoRub seems to help. There may actually be something to it. Vicks VapoRub contains a mixture of menthol, eucalyptus oil, camphor, and thymol. These ingredients are active against several fungal organisms that cause onychomycosis (nail fungus). One observational study suggests that applying Vicks VapoRub to the infected toenail daily until it grows out appears to clear the infection in some people. This, however, isn't enough proof to say that it works. But given the high cost and risk of side effects with systemic (oral medication) therapy, it may be worth a try in some cases.

Q: Are there any other treatments for onychomycosis?

A: Tea tree oil, applied topically, is another natural treatment that's sometimes tried; however, there is insufficient evidence to recommend its use for nail fungus. Penlac, a prescriptive med, is a topical nail polish, however, it is reported to have less than a 9% cure rate. Topical treatments must be used every day for at least 6 months. They work by inhibiting new fungal growth and it takes at least this long for the new nail to grow in.

Oral prescriptive medication therapy is generally more effective than topicals. However, they generally are very expensive, not always covered by health insurance plans, and must have blood work checked before and during treatment in many cases. These formulations kill the fungus so are used for only 6 to 12 weeks but you won’t see results until the nail grows completely back, usually 6 months or so.

Recurrence is common with ALL treatments, but there are ways to minimize chances of reinfection:

- Wash your feet regularly and dry them thoroughly before putting on socks or shoes.
- Wear flip flops in shared showers, spas, and around pools.
- If your feet perspire sprinkle an antifungal powder on your feet after showering.
- Women should avoid artificial nails and nail polish. These prevent moisture which collects beneath the nails from evaporating. Fungi thrive in moist environments.
- Don’t clip your nails too close...this makes it easier for fungus to get in.