SYMPTOM

Smelly feet

Smelly feet are feet with a noticeable odour, often caused by sweat and bacteria

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Strong foot odour, often worse after wearing shoes

WHERE IT IS FELT
Feet, especially soles and between the toes

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Sweating, bacteria, damp socks or shoes

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Spreading redness, warmth, swelling, or fever with a foot wound

USUALLY LASTS
Based on sweating, footwear, skin infection, and foot care

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Odour persists despite self-care or skin changes develop

Overview

Smelly feet means having a strong or unpleasant odour from one or both feet. The medical term sometimes used is bromodosis .

Sweat itself usually has little smell. Odour develops when bacteria on the skin break down sweat and dead skin. Feet are prone to this because shoes and socks can trap heat and moisture.

Foot odour is often temporary and improves with regular washing, dry socks, and allowing shoes to dry. Sometimes it is linked to athlete's foot, excessive sweating, or a bacterial skin condition.

The smell alone is not usually urgent. Pain, spreading redness, swelling, a wound, or fever can point to an infection that needs prompt care.

What it may feel or look like

The main symptom is a noticeable smell from the feet, socks, or shoes. It may become stronger after exercise, warm weather, a long day in closed shoes, or wearing the same shoes

repeatedly.

You may also notice:

These changes can help suggest a cause, but they do not confirm one. More than one problem can occur at the same time.

- Damp feet or socks
- Soft, pale, or wrinkled skin between the toes
- Peeling, cracking, itching, or burning skin
- Small shallow pits on the soles
- Thickened or discoloured toenails
- Blisters, sore areas, or broken skin

Common causes

Sweat and normal skin bacteria are the most common explanation. Sweat stays trapped around the feet, giving bacteria a warm, damp place to grow. This is more likely with non-breathable shoes, damp socks, exercise, or hot conditions.

Wearing shoes before they have dried can keep moisture and odour inside them. The smell may return quickly even after washing your feet if the same damp footwear is used again.

Athlete's foot is a fungal skin infection. It often causes itching, peeling, cracking, or pale soggy skin between the toes. It can also affect the soles. Fungal nail infection may cause thick, crumbly, or discoloured nails.

Less common causes include hyperhidrosis , which means sweating more than the body needs for cooling. It may affect the soles and make socks wet even without heat or exercise.

Pitted keratolysis is a bacterial condition that affects the outer skin of the soles. It can cause a strong smell and clusters of tiny shallow pits, often on weight-bearing areas such as the heel or ball of the foot. It is more likely when feet remain sweaty for long periods.

A wound or cracked skin can occasionally become infected. This is more concerning when there is increasing pain, warmth, redness, swelling, or drainage.

When to seek medical care

Book a routine appointment if the smell continues after a few weeks of consistent foot care, keeps returning, or affects your daily life. You should also arrange an assessment if you have

persistent itching, peeling, pits, painful cracks, nail changes, or unusually heavy sweating.

Seek same-day medical advice if you have:

Call emergency services if signs of a foot infection occur with confusion, fainting, severe weakness, or difficulty breathing. These symptoms can indicate a serious whole-body response to infection.

- Spreading redness, warmth, or swelling
- Increasing pain or pus from a crack, blister, or wound
- Fever or chills with a foot problem
- A new wound or infection signs when you have diabetes, poor circulation, or reduced immunity

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the smell started, what makes it worse, how much your feet sweat, and whether you have itching, pain, broken skin, or nail changes. They may also ask about work footwear, sports, medical conditions, and treatments you have tried.

They will usually examine the soles, spaces between the toes, nails, socks, and shoes. The appearance and location of skin changes may be enough to suggest the likely cause.

If a fungal infection is uncertain, a small skin or nail sample may be sent for testing. Tests are not usually needed when sweat, damp footwear, and bacteria are the clear explanation.

Treatment and self-care

Wash your feet daily with soap and water, including between the toes. Dry them carefully afterward. Avoid vigorous scrubbing if the skin is cracked or sore.

Put on clean socks each day and change them sooner if they become damp. Moisture-wicking or breathable socks may help. Wash socks according to their care instructions.

Alternate shoes so each pair can dry fully before being worn again. Remove insoles when possible and follow the manufacturer's cleaning instructions. Breathable footwear or open shoes may help when practical and safe.

Foot powder can absorb some moisture. A foot antiperspirant reduces sweating, while a deodorant mainly covers smell. Follow the product label and avoid putting products on broken or inflamed skin unless a healthcare professional advises it.

If you have itching and peeling that may be athlete's foot, a pharmacist can help you choose an over-the-counter antifungal treatment and explain how to use it. Seek advice if the diagnosis is unclear, the skin is badly cracked, or treatment does not help.

Pitted keratolysis may require a prescribed antibacterial treatment as well as measures to keep the feet dry. Excessive sweating can also be treated, but the best option depends on its severity and whether there is another cause.

Do not use bleach, household disinfectants, or harsh chemicals on your skin. These can cause burns and make damaged skin more vulnerable to infection.

What to expect

Odour caused by sweat and damp footwear may begin improving once the feet and shoes are kept clean and dry. Shoes can hold odour, so improvement may not be immediate.

Athlete's foot, bacterial skin conditions, and excessive sweating may take longer and can return if moisture remains trapped. Complete any recommended treatment according to its directions, even if the smell improves earlier.

Ongoing symptoms do not necessarily mean poor hygiene. Persistent sweating, skin conditions, work footwear, or repeated exposure to damp environments may all play a part.

Common questions

Can smelly feet spread to other people?

The smell itself is not contagious. However, fungal infections such as athlete's foot can spread through direct contact or contaminated floors, towels, socks, and shoes.

Why do my feet smell soon after washing?

Moist shoes, heavy sweating, or bacteria living in the outer layers of skin may cause the smell to return. Skin changes such as pits, peeling, or cracks may suggest another cause.

Should I wear socks to bed?

This is usually unnecessary. Letting your feet stay cool and dry may help. If you need socks for warmth, choose a clean, dry, breathable pair.

Can diet cause foot odour?

Some foods or medicines may change body odour, but trapped sweat and bacteria are more common causes of foot smell. Discuss a new or unexplained change with a healthcare

professional rather than stopping prescribed medicine yourself.

Is foot odour a sign of diabetes?

Foot odour alone does not mean you have diabetes. Diabetes can make foot wounds and infections more serious, so people with diabetes should seek prompt advice about broken skin, redness, swelling, or drainage.

Sources

- NHS. "Smelly feet"
- NHS. "Athlete's foot"
- American Academy of Dermatology Association. "How to prevent athlete's foot"
- DermNet New Zealand. "Pitted keratolysis"
- Merck Manual Consumer Version. "Excessive Sweating"