Whirlpool Footspa Safety Fact Sheet

Skin Infection & Whirlpool Footbath FAQs:

What is the problem?

One Illinois woman reported a skin infection and boils that have been traced to contaminated footspas used by nail salons. A recent outbreak in California resulted in over 100 women with similar infections. When these customers soaked their feet in the footbath as part of their pedicures, they became infected. Because the footbaths had not been properly cleaned, hair and skin debris build-up behind a screen in the tub basin allowed bacteria to grow to unusually high levels.

What do these infections look like?

Skin boils usually start out looking like a spider bite that gradually grows in size and eventually produces pus. Boils sometimes become open wounds and may leave scars.

What causes these infections?

These infections are caused by Mycobacterium fortuitum and other related mycobacteria. We come into contact with this type of bacteria everyday because it is normally found in water and soil.

How common are these types of skin infections?

These infections are relatively rare. If salon whirlpool footbaths are cleaned and disinfected properly, and in accordance with the guidelines issued jointly by the Illinois Departments of Public Health and Financial and Professional Regulation, the risk of these infections is very small.

How are these infections treated?

These infections can be treated with antibiotics. In some cases, these boils will heal without treatment.

What should I do if I have a skin infection that may be from a salon whirlpool footbath?

Go to your doctor. Tell him or her that you have had your legs in a whirlpool footbath. If indicated, the doctor can take a small biopsy of a boil for mycobacterial culture. Also,
Please call the Division of Professional Regulation 312/814-6910 to report any problems you believe are a result of your salon, or file a complaint by e-mail.

What can I do to protect myself?

First, do not have a pedicure with freshly shaved legs or with open wounds on your legs or feet. In the California outbreak, shaving one’s legs within 24 hours before a pedicure was a significant risk factor for infection.

Next, check out the salon. Make sure its License, and the licenses of its nail technicians and cosmetologists are posted in plain sight and that they are current;

Look around to see if the salon is clean, free of trash, and set up with clean, sanitized instruments;

Don’t be afraid to ask the operator how the foot spas are cleaned. If they hesitate or won’t answer you, it could be a sign you might want to take your business elsewhere;

If you have any doubts about the cleanliness standards at the salon, leave.

What has the State of Illinois done to protect salon clients?

The Department of Financial and Professional Regulation (IDFPR) has issued new rules requiring licensed nail salons to thoroughly clean and sanitize spa pedicure chairs on a regular basis. Even before these rules took effect, IDFPR communicated directly with every licensed salon owner, providing them with guidelines for sanitation that salons should follow.

The following guidance has been provided to salon staff on how foot spas are to be cleaned:

1) After each client:

   A) Drain all water from the foot spa, pedicure basin or bowl;
   B) Clean the interior surfaces and walls of the foot spa or basin with soap or detergent to remove all visible debris; rinse with clean, clear water;
   C) Disinfect by spraying the interior surface of the foot basin or bowl with either an EPA registered disinfectant (demonstrated bactericidal, fungicidal, and virucidal activity used according to manufacturer’s instructions), or 10% bleach solution; and,
   D) Wipe dry.

2) At the end of every day, after the last client:

   A) Perform the procedures of (1) ;
B) Remove the screen from whirlpool basin. All debris trapped behind the screen of each foot spa shall be removed with a brush and soap or detergent, then the screen and the inlet shall be cleaned to remove all visible debris with soap or detergent and water;
C) Before replacing the screen, totally immerse the screen in either an EPA registered disinfectant or 10% bleach solution;
D) Fill the basin with warm water and low-sudsing soap, turn the system on and flush the spa system for 5 minutes, then rinse and drain.

3) Once every week:

A) Repeat the procedures of (c) (2), then fill the foot spa or basin with cold water and one tablespoon of 5.25% liquid household bleach (or the equivalent) for each one gallon of water based on the capacity of unit;
B) Turn unit on and circulate the bleach solution through the system for 5 to 10 minutes, turn unit off;
C) Let the bleach solution sit in the spa or pedicure basin overnight (at least 6 – 10 hours);
D) The following morning, and before the first client, drain bleach solution;
E) Fill the basin with clean water, turn the system on and flush the system with clean water and drain;
F) Make a record of the date and time of this cleaning and disinfecting. The record for the last 90 days shall be readily accessible and available upon client or inspector request. Separate logs for weekly and daily procedures are needed but may be kept in the same document log.