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Barefoot in the Park? Watch Your Step

Doctors Warn of Parasites Lurking in Even the Tidiest Lawns

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

People have walked barefoot in the grass for thousands of years, and barefoot in New York City's parks at least since the days of *Olmsted and Vaux*. Neil Simon wrote a play about it, and Robert Redford and Jane Fonda starred in the movie.

As sun blankets the city, many people hardly think twice before shedding their inhibitions — and their shoes. Neither New York's health department nor the parks department has any rules against going barefoot on the city's streets or in its parks, officials said.

But while many doctors say there is nothing wrong with walking barefoot in New York, some see small but definite risks. They range from the obvious, like contracting tetanus from stepping on a rusty nail, to the invisible, like developing athlete's foot from walking in wet grass.

"When something doesn't happen to you, you don't consider yourself lucky," said Dr. Judith Hellman, a Manhattan dermatologist and assistant professor at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "But when you go barefoot, you are exposing yourself beyond what you really need to."

Don't tell Thao Le, a business development coordinator who, if not for a drizzle, might have been among

the regulars going shoeless in the emerald green of Bryant Park in Midtown the other day.

"You take off your shoes, it's the best," said Ms. Le, 40. "You're in tune with Mother Nature."

But, the experts say, it is the grass in many city parks, so innocent-looking, so tempting, so redolent of the free-spirited days of childhood, that may pose the most unexpected risks, because unlike a rusty nail, they are invisible to the naked eye.

Summer's near, and New Yorkers are kicking off their shoes. But some doctors say that can lead to infection.

Bacteria are everywhere, from the sidewalks to the subway, and normally, the skin forms a fairly good barrier to infection, doctors said. In general, people with cuts or cracks on their feet or people with compromised immune systems are more likely to pick up

an infection from walking barefoot. But getting wet feet by walking barefoot in damp grass can damage the skin's natural barrier, allowing infections to take hold, said Dr. Giuseppe Militello, an assistant professor of clinical dermatology at Columbia University.

People could be vulnerable to infection from three main types of organism from going barefoot in the grass, he said, including pseudomonas bacteria, the type of fungus that causes athlete's foot, and the virus that causes plantar warts.

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Barefoot in the Park? Watch Your Step, Doctors Say

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"These organisms are found in the common environment," Dr. Militello said, "and you need to give them the right conditions to infect you."

The right conditions can be found in many manicured city parks, he said, where the grass is moist and shaded, well-watered by automatic sprinkler systems, and well-trampled by thousands of feet, shod and unshod, human and animal, carrying countless infectious organisms.

"It resides in the grass and earth, you pick it up and it festers in your shoes," Dr. Militello said. "I think the best thing to do is to wear sandals or flip-flops or to just not get your feet wet. And when you do get your feet wet, thoroughly dry them before putting your shoes back on."

Dr. Jessica Sessions, a pediatrician at the William F. Ryan Community Health Center on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, said she hated to be a spoilsport, but nonetheless recommended that her patients wear shoes outdoors. "At least if it's on your shoe, you take your shoes off at the door," she said. "If it's on your feet, you bring it all into the apartment."

Adrian Benepe, the city's parks commissioner, reacted warily at first when asked for his recommendation about going barefoot in the park. "My official view is there's no rules against it," he said. "However, in certain areas, like playgrounds, we do advise people to wear shoes, particularly children."

The black rubber surface of some playgrounds can get burning hot, he said, and people could stub their toes or step on broken glass.

But Mr. Benepe admitted that he allowed his own children, now 17 and 21, to go barefoot outdoors,

"and they managed to survive."

He even confessed to having done it himself on many a beautiful summer day. Mr. Benepe said that doctors, knowing the worst that can happen, "are going to be cautious; that's the nature of doctors."

Jerome Barth, the operations director at Bryant Park, works hard to keep his grass looking pristine. It is an acre and a quarter of Kentucky bluegrass, the strips of turf unfurled on top of six inches of sand and replaced twice a year.

It is picked clean of litter three to four times daily; trod by about 1,200 pairs of feet on a typical warm sunny afternoon at 1:15, its busiest time; watered at night; and photographed daily from the 31st floor of a nearby building to detect imperfections that cannot be seen at ground level.

Yes, Mr. Barth has shed his shoes outdoors — "mostly on weekends when I have brought

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my little girls to the park," he said — with no ill effects.

"It is pleasant," he said in an e-mail message. "Do you recall that scene in 'Pretty Woman' where Richard Gere walks barefoot on the grass? The imagery suggests that he does so to reconnect to his premogul persona. Well, I think there is a bit of that in every 'barefoot walk,' one feels a touch closer to nature."

Too close to nature, according to Dr. Militello.

He said he never touched bare toe to public parkland. "If I'm in the park, I put a blanket down, and I'm on that blanket and I don't venture off," he said. "The only place I go barefoot is on the

beach."

In the worst case, pseudomonas bacteria — which Dr. Militello says has a "very pungent, vinegary smell" — can be fatal if it gets into the lungs or bloodstream, as it sometimes does when it is contracted at hospitals. (Such a serious consequence, he said, is an unlikely outcome of a skin infection, whose symptoms would typically be limited to redness, pain and pus.)

A parasite like hookworm, carried in dog or cat feces, could also be picked up in a sandbox or dirt, though it is more common in the warmer Southeast, doctors said. Hookworm can cause a rash, or more seriously, anemia.

Dr. Mitchell Greenbaum, a podiatrist affiliated with St. Francis Hospital in Roslyn, on Long Island, says he has seen more sprained ankles and stubbed toes than infections from bare feet.

Diabetics are more prone to foot injuries, he said, because they tend to have limited sensation in their feet and may unwittingly step on hot surfaces or sharp objects.

But Dr. Hellman, the dermatologist, said that outside of the obvious hazards, danger could lurk in even the most innocuous places, like a rose or a lawn.

Grass can be sharp enough to cut, she said, allowing bacteria or parasites to enter the skin. Rose bushes can transmit a fungal infection called sporotrichosis. The fungus could be injected into the body, she said, just by stepping on a thorn.

But for many people, the joy of feeling the cool grass underfoot may outweigh one of its consequences, bromhidrosis, known colloquially as stinky feet, which is caused by bacteria that thrive in moist places — and thus is a risk of putting wet feet back into shoes and free spirits under wraps again.

Health Risks Hiding in the Grass

Kicking off your shoes?

Be careful. Here are 10 health risks associated with a beloved warm-weather ritual, according to Dr. Judith Hellman, a dermatologist:

- Blades of grass can cut the skin; enter bacteria and other parasites.
- Hookworm larvae, from animal feces, can result in infection.
- Stepping on rusty nails can cause tetanus.
- People with diabetes can have decreased sensitivity in their feet, allowing injuries to go unnoticed.
- Rose bushes can carry an organism that causes sporotrichosis, a fungal infection.

● Nocardia, a soil-based bacterium, can cause an infection that can lead to lumps called mycetomas, as well as abscesses and ulcerations.

● Plantar warts or athlete's foot spread from one bare foot to the next, via grass or a blanket.

● Deer ticks, found in parks in the Northeast, can cause Lyme disease.

● Black widow spiders, also prevalent in the Northeast, can be very dangerous if stepped on.

● The bite of fire ants causes blisters and infection.

● The infection bromhidrosis is also known as stinky feet.

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