

Skin Infections and Whirlpool Footbaths

Recently California Health Officials received complaints about a large outbreak of skin boils, which were traced back to a single nail salon in which footbaths had not been properly cleaned. The bacteria had been introduced through the municipal tap water and then flourished in the footspas, a nutrient rich environment fed by hair and skin debris that collected behind inlet suction screens. The infections, which originated deep in the hair follicles, were most common in women who had shaved their legs before receiving pedicures and who received an oil massage of their feet and calves after the footbath.

These skin boils usually start out looking like a spider bite that gradually grows in size and eventually produces pus. Boils sometimes become opened wounds and may leave scars. These infections are caused by mycobacterium fortuitum and other related mycobacteria. We come into contact with this type of bacteria everyday as it is found normally in water and soil.

These types of infections are relatively rare. If salon whirlpool footbaths are cleaned and disinfected properly and in accordance with Washington State Cosmetology instructions that are given at time of inspection, the risk of these infections occurring in a salon setting is very small.

Washington State Department of Licensing currently hands out guidelines on the proper sanitizing and disinfection of the whirlpool spas. Inspectors also request a demonstration of how the salons clean and disinfect the spas at time of the inspection. The Department of Licensing is in the process of amending the rules that regulate Cosmetologist, Manicurist, Barbers and Esthetician and will adopt standards for the sanitation and disinfection of the footspas.

Footspas that are not regularly cleaned and disinfected can pose a health risk for consumers. Before using a footspa, the Cosmetology program for the Department of Licensing recommends that consumers take a few common sense precautions:

1. Make sure the shop owner and operator is currently licensed.
2. If you have, or suspect that you have, a skin infection, do not get a pedicure or utilize the footspa bath.
3. Do not shave your legs before your appointment. Shaving may result in nicks or cuts, which may be pathways for bacteria.
4. If you have broken skins or lesions, such as cuts or nicks, do not get a pedicure or whirlpool footbath treatment.
5. Take a look around the salon to determine if it is clean, free of trash and set up with clean instruments.
6. There should be no standing water in the foot spa. If water is being drained from the footspa just when you arrive, ask that it be cleaned and disinfected before you use it.

7. Ask the operator what their standard is for cleaning and disinfecting. If the footspa has not been sanitized since the last customer used it, ask that it be cleaned and disinfected before you put your feet into it.
8. Ask the operator when the chair was last cleaned. If it has not been cleaned since the last customer used it, ask that it be cleaned before you use it.
9. If you have any doubts about the cleanliness of the salon or their adherence to sanitation requirement for foot spa disinfection, **leave**.

Pedicures and footspas can be a wonderful experience if licensees are properly cleaning and disinfecting their footspas and tools. Consumers have the right to know the dangers that could affect them and to know the questions to ask.

The salons are inspected on a bi-annual basis or can also be the result of a complaint. If you have concerns if a salon is licensed, you can check our website at <https://dol.wa.gov/professional-licenses/look-business-or-professional-license>, or if you would like to see if a salon has any complaints, you can call (360) 664-6645 or submit a request at <https://dol.wa.gov/about/public-disclosure/requesting-public-records>