

Puotinen, My Purple Toe

Have I told you about my purple toe? It's on my right foot and it's the second toe, the one that sticks out just a little bit farther than the others. Did you know, that this toe, the second one, turns purple?

It's not purple all of the time and maybe purple isn't even the best way to describe it. Eggplant? I wish it were electric purple or purple mountain majesty or grape popsicle purple. Purple is my son's favorite color. His computer case is purple. His clarinet case is purple. His suitcase is purple. His school binder, which he disemboweled in new ways all school year—first removing the strap, then shredding the front pouch, then taking out the cardboard insert that helps keep its structure, then doing something to the 3 ring binders that I can't quite figure out that makes them only barely close and finally, losing the zipper and the handle so he carried it by pinching the fabric at one corner—is purple too.

The purple he prefers is royal purple or Tyranian purple. Not fuchsia or pearly purple or phlox. Tyranian purple is named after the ancient city of Tyre, where it was originally discovered, according to legend, rimming the mouth of Hercules' dog after it had consumed some sea snails. It was the mucous of these snails, and a ton of it, that was used to create the shade. The mucous of 250,000 sea snails were necessary for producing just one ounce of dye. An expensive color reserved for emperors and kings and other elite. Although he might wish it were the case, as far as I know, no sea snails or their mucous were used to create the purple that adorns my son's life.

Technically speaking, I suppose, I have a purple toenail and not a purple toe, but toe is much more pleasing to write and to hear and to imagine as purple than toenail. Plus, anyone can have a purple toenail; just slap some nail polish on it and it's purple. But, a purple toe is special. A purple toe is a sign of a runner. Before I started running, I did not know that this was a thing, that your toe could turn purple when you run a lot.

Is it the second toe, the one that sticks out a littler farther, that's purple for everyone who gets purple toes? Or, could it be the big toe or the middle toe or the ring toe or the pinky toe?

It's called runner's toe or black toe or BT, for short. I like purple toe because that's what mine looks like to me, so that's what I call it, or "my purple toe" or "my perfectly purple, not painful at all, toe." But, I have this rare eye disease, a form of juvenile macular degeneration called Best's disease, that makes me fail color-blind tests and that has scrambled my macula so much that I can't always see faces clearly or the color red or objects that first appear in certain areas of my central vision, so just because I see my toe as purple doesn't mean it is purple or anything close to purple.

If you looked at my toe, would it look purple to you, or black or gray or blue or gross, or just extra long, sticking out farther than the other toes?

A toe turns purple or black or gray or blue or ugly or awesome, depending on your perspective, for many running-related reasons: friction and increased mileage and burst

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capillaries and blood pooling under the nail and maybe ill-fitting shoes with a toe box that isn't big enough or running down lots of hills, which often causes your foot to slide forward.

Here's how it usually works for me: After a random long run, my toe, the second one, that sticks out just a little bit farther, hurts slightly and feels strange. It doesn't turn purple right away, but I know what's coming: in a day or two, hello purple toe! The toenail never falls off. It just grows back in delightfully grotesque ways: twisted, bent, doubled and thick. So thick! So many layers of toenail, mashed together.

I wonder, how many layers are there?

After the nail grows back, it usually returns to its normal color. That is, until the cycle begins again. The "purple toe effect" has been happening for at least five years now.

I think it should be called "my perfectly freaky purple, not painful at all, toe" because it doesn't usually hurt and doesn't do anything except look gross.

Approximately 3 months after the toe turns purple, a new nail will grow and the old one will fall off, or it won't, and you'll have a double toenail, like me. Throughout this process, you can keep running or marveling at your toe or hiding it under socks or making your mother-in-law/partner/kids cringe or forgetting that it exists until someone sees it and either shrinks away in disgust or breathlessly asks, "what happened?" without any problems.

That is, as long as your black or gray or blue or purple toe doesn't hurt a lot or keep hurting or turn totally black. If that happens, you probably have a sub hematoma. A sub hematoma occurs when there's more serious trauma to the toe and the blood flow pressure builds up with nowhere to go. You need to relieve that pressure by creating a small hole in the nail with a sterilized needle and then pushing down while the blood oozes out. Oozes. This was the word that the online source that I consulted used, a site called Lazy Runner. For the record, I have never had a sub hematoma and needed to make blood ooze, although I have had an in-grown toe nail and needed to make pus ooze.

Runners take pleasure in talking about the gross things that running does to their bodies and the gross things that they do to their bodies to keep running.

I am never bothered or alarmed or concerned by my perfectly purple, not painful at all, toe. Maybe that's because it doesn't hurt. Or maybe it's because I have always had weirdly shaped feet, with freaky toenails that curl up too much and bunions just below both of my big toes. Or maybe it's because one of my toes has suffered a fate far worse

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than runner's toe or BT or the purple toe effect. I have had an in-grown toenail in my big toe twice. Was it the same big toe? I don't know. All I remember is pain, pressure and pus. And not being able to wear shoes or to walk without a limp.

"Runner's toe" is frequently referred to as a "runner's rite of passage" or "badge of honor." I'm not sure I'd say I'm honored to have my perfectly freaky purple, not painful at all, toe. More like pleased by how it shocks non-runners. Or fascinated by its freakishness and its color: perfectly purple. Or relieved that it's only a purple toe and not something worse that prevents me from running. Most of the time I forget about it. It's just a toe that's part of my right foot that enables me to run—and walk and skip and saunter—without much pain and hardly any injury. It sticks out farther than my other toes. And it just happens to be purple or black or blue or whatever color it looks like to you.