

Patient Information

Foot Care For Diabetics



People with diabetes experience higher than normal blood glucose levels, which can affect the heart, eyes, kidneys and feet. This handout focuses on why it is especially important that you take proper care of your feet if you have diabetes.

Two Reasons for Foot Problems

One factor contributing to foot problems in diabetes is nerve damage, which causes a lack of sensation in your feet. As a result, you might not feel pain, heat or cold. A minor cut on your foot could get infected, and you might not even notice.

Another problem you might have is decreased circulation, which means that less blood flows to your feet, making it harder for wounds to heal.

Common Foot Problems

If you have diabetes, you're at greater risk for foot problems that can lead to infection:

- corns and calluses caused by rubbing or pressure on the same spot, forming thick layers of skin
- blisters caused by shoes that do not fit properly or by wearing shoes without socks
- ingrown toenails, which are toenail edges that have grown into the skin
- dry and cracked skin, caused when nerves in the legs and feet do not receive the message to keep the feet soft and moist; germs can then enter through the cracks
- athlete's foot (caused by a fungus), leading to red, cracked and itchy skin and thick, yellow and hard-to-cut toenails.

How to Care for Your Feet

Wash your feet every day using warm water and a mild soap. Use your elbow or a thermometer to check the temperature of the water — lack of sensation in your feet may prevent you from feeling when water is too hot. Pat your feet dry with a soft towel.

If the skin on your feet is dry and cracked, use a moisturizing cream. Check with your nurse practitioner about which kind to use. Never put the cream between your toes, since this could create an atmosphere for infection.

Inspect your feet every day for problems. You might need to use a mirror or enlist the help of someone you trust. Do not try to treat any foot problems with home remedies.

You may file corns or calluses lightly with a pumice stone or emery board if your NP says it's OK. Also, cut your toenails when needed after you wash your feet, since the toenails will be soft at that time. Trim straight across, and do not cut them too short. If your toenails are thick or too hard to cut, your NP can help you.

Wear shoes all the time to avoid irritations that could worsen or become infected. Do not leave your feet exposed by going barefoot or wearing sandals. Even at home, you should at least wear hard-soled slippers. Wear surf shoes at the beach, and remember to apply sunscreen to the tops of your feet when you are outside to avoid burns.

Finally, if you smoke, stop immediately. Smoking damages blood vessels, decreasing circulation to the feet.

The Right Shoes and Socks

Poorly fitting shoes can cause injury or irritation. Buy shoes that fit correctly — you should be able to wiggle your toes in them. Avoid plastic shoes since they don't stretch and your feet cannot breathe. Instead, choose leather or canvas shoes to support your feet and let air in and out.

Break in your new shoes gradually. In addition, inspect each shoe every day before you insert your foot. Make sure there are no torn linings or foreign objects, such as a tack or a pebble.

Always wear cotton or wool socks with your shoes to avoid blisters. Socks should fit loosely and leave no marks on your skin. Stockings can also be worn. Make sure they are not too tight — they shouldn't leave marks on your skin, either. In some cases, you may need inserts or even custom shoes to help with your foot problems.

Avoid the Worst-Case Scenario

Schedule a visit with your NP if you are having a problem with your feet that won't go away. If you avoid treating the problems, your feet could become infected, and poor blood flow could slow the healing process. Make sure you get your feet treated so that you can avoid severe complications such as amputation.

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