



Combat foot abuse: tips for foot health

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During the course of a day, the feet take immeasurable abuse. Think about the amount of shock they absorb over a lifetime of walking, standing, jumping, climbing and stomping. As we age, caring for our feet becomes a crucial matter, especially for diabetics. Our very independence can hinge on foot health.

Folks with diabetes are at higher risk for foot infections, which may lead to amputation. Nerve damage, loss of sensation and poor circulation up the ante for foot injuries. Many get cuts on their feet – even walk for hours with a rock in their shoe – and don't feel it. Others burn their feet on hot pavement or get a blister without realizing it until infection sets in, and infection is hard for diabetics to fight as circulation in the extremities is often poor.

So what can we do to lessen the risk of foot injury?

First, examine feet daily. If you can't get a good look at them, have a friend or family member check them out. Look for cuts, scrapes, dry broken skin, blisters and red areas on all parts of your feet, including between the toes. If all is well, wash and dry your feet thoroughly especially in-between toes.

Sealing in moisture with a thin layer of petroleum jelly or lotion will help skin to keep from cracking and peeling. Don't put lotion between the toes as the extra moisture can lead to infection. Experts also warn against soaking your feet. This leads to dry skin which can easily crack.

Protecting your feet from injury is very important. Never walk barefoot. Wear shoes and socks at all times – especially when outside, at the beach or near hot pavement. If your feet are cold, don't put them in hot water or use a heating pad – you could be burned. Wearing socks is the safest way to warm your feet.

Blood flow is crucial to foot health and I recommend daily activity to keep circulation strong and muscles supple. Here's one order most folks like to take. When sitting, try putting your feet up and wiggling your toes and ankles for five minutes. If you do this two to three times each day, you'll begin to notice a positive difference in your foot health. Also try to keep from crossing your legs for long periods of time and if you smoke, stop. Smoking is one of the biggest threats to your feet as it causes blood vessels to constrict lessening blood flow.

In-grown toenails are often a problem. If you can reach your toes, keep nails trimmed by cutting straight across, then filing edges down. If you cannot reach your toes, ask a family member or your health care provider for help. They can not only care for your toenails, but all corns, calluses and blisters. Do not try to treat corns and calluses yourself. Your physician should be aware of, and treat, all foot problems.

Your health care provider should also check your feet for sensation each year. This can be done with a monofilament or a tuning fork. Feet which are losing their sensation will need custom footwear, which can be prescribed for you and paid for by Medicare. If you have any foot deformities, such as hammer-toe and bunions, special footwear is necessary. Purchasing shoes off the shelf is courting disaster. Let your health care provider order footwear made especially for your needs.

Finally, if you want to remain footloose and fancy free for years to come, you must take care of your diabetes. Keeping glucose in the target range does wonders for circulation and nerve health. If you care for your feet today, you'll be able to enjoy many more independent tomorrows.