

Taking care of your feet

Foot care is important as foot problems are a common complication of diabetes. Your feet can be affected in two ways. Your blood supply may be affected, resulting in slower healing, and you may also lose some feeling in your feet due to nerve damage.

Circulation

Smoking, high blood fats and raised blood glucose levels can cause hardening or narrowing of your arteries as they become clogged up. The first sign of this is usually pain or cramps in the backs of your legs when walking. If the blood supply to your feet is reduced, cuts and sores may not heal.

Nerve supply

Nerves are the 'wiring' of your body, carrying feelings to your brain from the rest of your body. The nerves to your feet are the most likely to be affected by diabetes.

Damaged nerves (neuropathy) can cause painful, numb or insensitive feet. Minor cuts, blisters, or burns may not be felt and ulcers can develop, which you may not be aware of. Some people with neuropathy experience uncomfortable sensations, such as burning, tingling and pain. This is often worse at night.

Foot care for diabetes

All people with diabetes should have their feet checked at least annually by a doctor or podiatrist, to detect problems early and prevent ulcers.

People who have circulation problems or damage to the nerves (neuropathy) need to take special care of their feet.

Tips for daily foot care

- Inspect your feet daily. Carefully look at your feet. Check between your toes and if necessary use a mirror to check underneath your feet
- Look for swelling, redness, heat that may be a sign of infection
- Wash feet every day and dry well between the toes
- Use methylated spirits if there is a lot of moisture between the toes
- Moisturise dry skin, especially cracked heels (eg Sorbolene cream) but not between the toes
- Calluses may be treated with careful use of a pumice stone

Do not use blades or sharp instruments

To avoid injury

- Never go barefoot. Wear appropriate shoes to protect your feet, eg sandals (not open-toed ones) for the beach, closed-in shoes for gardening or maintenance, sports shoes for exercise
- Wear well fitting socks. Avoid tight elastic tops and seams that may rub
- Wear well fitting leather shoes. Check inside for objects or folded lining before putting them on
- Cut toenails along the shape of the toe. Cut nails when soft after bathing
- If you can't easily see or reach your feet or if toenails are thick or ingrown, a podiatrist should cut your toenails
- See a podiatrist to treat corns and calluses
- Wear bed socks for cold feet rather than a hot water bottle
- Be very careful not to put feet too close to radiant heaters
- Check bath water with your elbow before plunging feet in



When buying new shoes

- Don't be rushed into buying shoes that you aren't 100% happy with
- Avoid open-toed shoes and narrow toes
- Have your feet measured and try on the shoes to check they are long enough, wide enough, and deep enough for your feet

First aid

- If you cut your foot, treat it immediately. Clean the area with a mild antiseptic such as Betadine™ or liquid Savlon™. Cover with clean gauze and surgical tape rather than band aids
- Change the dressing and check the wound at least daily
- See your doctor if the wound becomes discoloured, looks infected or is not healing within two days
- Contact your doctor immediately if you develop pain, throbbing, heat, swelling or discolouration or ulcers on your feet

To improve circulation levels

- Reduce cholesterol levels
- Keep blood glucose levels as close to normal as possible
- Don't smoke. Smoking causes spasm and narrowing of blood vessels. Smokers have more heart attacks, strokes and circulation problems than non-smokers
- Exercise daily. A brisk walk will help keep the blood flowing around the body
- Avoid garters or socks with tight tops

Podiatrists

Podiatrists are experts in looking after feet and lower limbs. They are highly trained health professionals who deal with the prevention, diagnosis and management of foot problems. If you have impaired circulation or feeling in your feet, you should see a podiatrist at least yearly, and you should not attempt to treat corns and calluses yourself. You don't need a referral to seek advice or treatment from a podiatrist.

Most foot ulcers can be prevented

- Check your feet each day
- Wear appropriate footwear
- Report problems promptly to your doctor or podiatrist
- Feet should be examined regularly for any signs of nerve damage or poor circulation. Your doctor or podiatrist should do this at least yearly

