

Diabetes: foot care for diabetics

Why are doctors so concerned about your feet?

Problems with the feet are common complications that diabetics suffer from and need special attention. A foot problem can be very difficult to heal once it has set in. Diabetes can decrease the circulation to your feet so that healing is relatively poor. Diabetes can also affect the nerves to the feet so that they are less sensitive to pain, touch and temperature. Diabetics are also prone to infection because the feet are almost 'out of sight and out of mind' and problems can develop without your being aware of them. Very special care of your feet is essential, and they should be checked every day.

What type of problems occur?

Pressure sores can develop on the soles of your feet from things such as corns, calluses and stones or nails in your shoes. Minor injuries such as cuts and splinters can become a major problem through poor healing. Problems with toenails such as *paronychia* (infection around the nail) and ingrowing nails can get out of control. Prevention of these problems is the best way. Watch out for soggy skin between the toes.

What should you do?

1. Keep your diabetes under good control and do not smoke.
2. Check your feet *daily*. If necessary use a mirror to inspect the soles. If your vision is poor ask someone else to check for you. Report any sores, infection or unusual signs. Make sure you check between the toes.
3. Wash your feet daily:
 - Use lukewarm water (beware of scalds).
 - Dry thoroughly, especially between the toes.
 - Soften dry skin, especially around the heels, with lanoline.
 - Applying methylated spirits between the toes helps stop dampness: a cotton bud can be used.
4. Attend to your toenails regularly:
 - Clip them straight across with clippers.
 - Do not cut them deep into corners or too short across.
 - File any rough edges.

5. Wear clean cotton or wool socks daily; avoid socks with elastic tops.
6. Exercise your feet each day to help the circulation in them.
7. Check the insides of your shoes each week or before wearing them to make sure no nails are pointing into the soles.

How to avoid injury

- Wear good-fitting, comfortable leather shoes.
- Shoes should never be 'broken in'—they should fit from the start.
- The shoes must not be too tight or too loose.
- Do not walk barefoot, especially outdoors.
- Do not cut your own toenails if you have difficulty reaching them or have poor eyesight.
- Avoid home treatments and corn pads that contain acid.
- Be careful when you walk around the garden and in the home. Sharp objects such as stakes in the garden, protruding nails and sharp corners of beds at floor level should never be in the home of a diabetic.
- Do not use hot-water bottles or heating pads on your feet.
- Do not test the temperature of water with your feet.
- Take extra care when sitting in front of an open fire or heater.

Treating cuts and injuries

If you do get a cut or other injury:

- Clean the wound with a mild antiseptic such as liquid Savlon or dilute Betadine.
- Cover it with clean gauze and surgical tape.
- Have your doctor check the wound if you are concerned especially if it does not heal in 2 days or has signs of infection.

Visit the expert

If you have problems with your foot care and especially if your physical condition makes attending to toenails, corns and calluses difficult, you should visit a podiatrist. Your doctor will advise you.