

Why is good foot care important for people with diabetes?

Having diabetes means that you're much more likely to develop problems with your feet. For instance, raised blood sugars, blood fats and blood pressure levels can damage the nerves in the feet causing a condition called peripheral neuropathy. Nerve damage combined with poor circulation (so that you get less blood supply to your feet) can slow the healing of any cuts and sores you might have and increase your chances of developing a foot infection.

High blood sugar levels can lead to damage to the nerves of your body and the circulation; when this affects the feet then foot ulcers can become so large that the foot (or leg) has to be amputated. Too much glucose in the blood damages the walls of tiny arteries around the nerves, the nerves die causing tingling, pins and needles, numbness, burning and pain. It usually starts with your feet, so if your feet are not looked after properly, they could end up being cut off!

A person with damaged nerves (diabetic neuropathy) may lose their sense of feeling in their feet such as:

- not noticing that an ill-fitting shoe has created a blister.
- not noticing that small cut when walking barefoot.

When diabetic foot conditions are left untreated, they can result in limb-threatening conditions. Every week diabetes is reported as causing around 170 amputations (of the foot or lower leg) in the UK – many of which could have been prevented by good foot care and better diabetic blood sugar control. The risk for someone with diabetes of having an amputation is 20 times greater, compared to a person who does not have diabetes.

So look at your feet every day

Inspecting the soles of your feet for early signs of inflammation or sores and taking action is particularly important with diabetes, and can prevent more serious problems such as ulcers developing or help you to spot an infection early. Try using an illuminated magnifying glass and a mirror placed under your foot for a close inspection, which helps if you struggle to lift your feet up. If this is too hard or your eyesight is not as good as it was, ask someone else to check your feet for you.

Look out for the following symptoms and signs that might indicate damage to the nerves in your feet due to your diabetes:

- tingling sensation, or pins and needles
- pain (burning)
- less sweaty feet
- changes to the colour of your feet
- changes to the shape of your feet
- blisters and cuts that you can see, but can't feel
- loss of feeling and sensation in your feet or legs.

If you have spotted any of these problems, consult your GP or practice nurse in person as soon as possible

Watch out whilst cutting your nails

Cut your nails carefully. Don't cut down the side of your nails to avoid ingrowing toenails. People, who are at high risk, should not cut their own nails but have them done by a qualified professional such as a podiatrist if possible. Similarly, people who have developed a loss of sensation or reduced blood flow may be

advised not to cut their own toenails, as there is always a risk of skin damage. Ask what is the best option for you when you have your yearly foot check at your diabetic review.

If your healthcare professional is happy for you to cut your toenails:

- cut them often but not too short or down the side.
- trim them with nail clippers and then use an emery board to file any corners.
- clean them gently with a nail brush - don't use sharp points of scissors to clean your nails - this isn't safe.
- if you are unsure whether you should or shouldn't cut your nails, or do not feel confident to do so, then a safer option would be to regularly (i.e., weekly) file your nails or get a family member to do them for you.
- washing daily is also a simple way to keep your feet and toenails clean and prevent infection.

If you've lost some sensation in your feet or you're worried about ingrowing toenails, see a podiatrist. They are used to helping with these problems.

Use moisturising cream every day

If your feet should become cracked or too dry, applying heel balm cream will help you to hydrate your skin, prevent cracking, and restore the normally smooth surface. Don't put cream between your toes, as this can cause problems. The same goes for the way you might apply talcum powder - if it gets clogged up between your toes, it could cause excessive dryness too.

Make sure your socks and shoes fit

Blisters can be dangerous for people with diabetes. If your shoes are too tight, too loose or rub you, don't wear them, even if they look great. Footwear choice is extremely important, and they should protect and not damage your feet. Try using appropriate footbeds or insoles inside your shoes which can be cut to the right size for your feet to give you more comfort and add protection to the soles of your feet.

Don't wear socks that are tight, loose or rub. Seamless bamboo socks can help; the material is particularly soft, and also extremely absorbent, leaving your feet much less prone to harm from moisture or sweat, and therefore maintaining the skin on your feet in an optimal condition.

Improve the flexibility of your feet

Using an exercise ball can improve the mobility of your feet. Your feet have three 'arches' – one on each side of the foot, and the other across the sole, from the base of the big toe to that of the little toe. As you get older, some of the flexibility of these arches can be lost, and that puts more of your weight on the bones and nerves, which can cause more aches and pains. Try using an exercise ball under your sole to enhance or regain that feeling of movement within your foot. A few minutes each day – or if possible twice a day – will help you to improve the flexibility and strength of your feet.

Digital aids & websites

This website has good information regarding foot complications:
<https://www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes/complications/feet>

If you want to know more about what digital aids you can use for your own health and well-being and weigh up your choices, take a look at:

<https://www.digihealthwell.co.uk>

Take a look at this handbook if you want to know more about how easy and useful digital aids can be matched for someone with diabetes or pre-diabetes to the purpose they want it for, such as healthy eating, regular exercise, better sleep and much more:

Chambers R, Ogunmekan S, Ruiz-Martin M, Stather P. Digital aids for self-care of your health and wellbeing; prediabetes and diabetes edition. ISBN 9798837474897. Amazon kindle & paperback July '22. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0B46F8WXM>

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