

Preventative Foot Care

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This article highlights the importance of foot care for everyone—not only people with high-risk feet. Readers are encouraged to use the basic steps mentioned in the article as a guide for preventing foot problems in both patients and themselves.

Introduction

The foot is made up of 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 tendons, ligaments and muscles. There are over 300 foot ailments that can occur, and it is estimated that 75 per cent of people will have foot problems at some time in their life. These problems can result from the intrinsic manifestations of systemic disease, inheritance, and abnormal foot structure or extrinsic factors such as long years of abuse, improperly fitted shoes and poor foot care or hygiene. Lack of mobility from foot problems can impact quality of life, and poor foot alignment can have an effect on the whole body.

Symptoms of certain diseases, like diabetes or conditions that affect circulation or nerves, can appear initially in the foot.

Early detection of common foot conditions may prevent and correct problems that could lead to both acute and chronic foot-related health conditions.

Common Foot Problems and Solutions

Fungal infections such as athlete's foot occur in moist warm areas, such as the environment in a shoe. The treatment for this condition is to apply appropriate foot hygiene, dry well interdigitally, use antifungal medication and wear shoes that have uppers made out of breathable material.

Dry skin can cause burning and stinging in feet, and lead to cracks that may cause secondary infections. The

treatment for dry skin is to use daily moisturizers that contain active ingredients such as urea or lactic acid.

Corns and calluses are the result of friction and shear stress over a bony prominence. The treatment for this condition is debridement, appropriate shoes and regular use of pumice and emollients.

Ingrown toe nails occur when part of the nail breaks into the skin of the toe. This can result in secondary infection as a result of the break in skin integrity. This problem is treated through appropriate nail cutting, packing to re-distribute the pressure on the side of the nail, and treating secondary infection. Shoes with a round toe box reduce the pressure on the sulci. Surgery is indicated if conservative measures fail or if the problem is recurrent.

Warts are skin growth resulting from viral infections. The treatment for this condition is freezing or medications that destroy the virus, and routine debridement.

General foot pain, such as heel pain, arch pain, and toe pain, is usually associated with traumatic injury and complicated by structural problems. The treatment for these conditions is based on assessment but is usually corrected through the combination of good physical therapy treatment, properly

fitted shoes and orthotics.

Flat feet, highly arched feet, bunions (hallux valgus) or hammer toes are foot deformities with an origin usually based in heredity, and complicated by improperly fitted shoes. The treatment for these conditions is good shoes and orthotics to prevent the deformity from progressing. Surgery may be an option if conservative management fails.



FIGURE 1
Callused feet



FIGURE 2
Ingrown toe nail



FIGURE 3
Hammer toes

Foot-care Tips

There are common proactive steps that most people can do to reduce the probability of incurring serious problems such as infections, injuries or foot strain.

Do ...

- Inspect feet daily.
- Watch for signs of infections.
- Wash feet well with mild soap and water, and dry well.
- Trim toe nail straight across or see a specialist.
- See a specialist regarding callus/corns/warts/ulcers.
- Moisturize and pumice dry skin.

Don't ...

- Forget your interdigital spaces.
- Dig down the sides of nails or cut too short.
- Use self-prescribed over-the-counter products to treat corns, calluses or warts.
- Use sharp instruments.
- Apply cream between toes.

Shoes

Shoes are often the cause of foot problems. Proper shoes help to avoid a variety of different problems. Footwear referral may be required.

Do ...

- Buy shoes that fit or see a footwear specialist.
- Buy shoes at the end of the day.
- Buy a firm-fitting heel.
- Buy a walking shoe with Velcro or laces and mid-tarsal support.
- Have enough room in the forefoot—wide, deep and long enough.
- Buy leather shoes or other breathable material with a shock-absorbing sole.
- Purchase the right shoe for the appropriate activity.

Don't ...

- Buy shoes that you hope will stretch; this will create pressure. Don't wear hand-me-downs.
- Buy them first thing in the day when the foot is less swollen; the shoe will be snug by the end of the day.
- Buy a shoe that is too big; it will create shear.
- Buy slip-on shoes for walking, as they will result in foot strain and toe deformity.
- Buy narrow or pointed shoes or shoes with a shallow toe box; this will result in blisters and bursitis.
- Buy synthetic shoes; they do not allow the foot to breathe and may lead to maceration.
- Wear high heels or slip-on shoes for activity; they result in foot strain, musculoskeletal pain, foot deformity, corns and calluses.

Barriers to Basic Foot Care

People who neglect to perform basic foot care do so for various reasons, or fail to seek appropriate help if they are unable to perform it themselves. Some of these causes may be associated with forgetfulness, a lack of motivation or the belief that foot care is unimportant. Other factors may relate to physical barriers such as vision problems or lack of mobility or sensation. In some cases, the barrier is financial. Cost of foot-care services, stable walking shoes, orthotics and various creams may be too high for many people.

This brief overview is not intended to make everyone a foot expert, nor does it even touch on the multitude of different foot problems that people can have. The key is to treat problems as soon as possible to prevent them from worsening. When self-care does not resolve the foot problem, get a referral to or seek the help of a health-care professional who is a foot specialist. Don't suffer silently ignoring the pain. Just because the feet are the farthest from the brain doesn't mean they should be the furthest from the mind.

The key elements of preventative care include

- annual examination of the feet by a health-care provider
- foot-wear and foot-care education
- daily self-care of the feet
- routine prophylactic foot care once barriers are identified
- properly fitted shoes

Remember, early detection and appropriate intervention will prevent many foot-related problems. ☺

Resources

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