

Healthy Feet for an Active Life

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Medicine and health awareness have progressed rapidly since 1900. Life expectancy of the average American has increased by about 30 years. Older persons make up an increasingly significant proportion of our total population, and their numbers are growing rapidly. In 1900, there were 3 million Americans age 65 or older. By 2004, persons aged 65 years or older numbered 36.3 million. They represented 12.4 percent of the U.S. population – about one in every eight Americans. By 2030, there will be about 71.5 million in that age group – more than twice the number in 2000.

If older people are to live useful, satisfying lives, they must be able to move about. Mobility is a vital ingredient in the independence that is cherished by our aging population. Foot ailments make it difficult or impossible to work or to participate in social activities.

Medical Concerns

According to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), impairment of the lower extremities is a leading cause of decreased activity in older people. As if foot problems weren't enough of a nuisance, they can also lead to knee, hip, and lower back pain that undermines mobility.

Doctors of podiatric medicine (DPMs) are often the first physicians to see signs of systemic conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, and circulatory disease in the foot. Among these signs are dry skin, brittle nails, burning and tingling sensations, feelings of cold, numbness, and discoloration.

The human foot is complex, containing 26 bones (the two feet contain a quarter of all the bones in the body), 33 joints, and a network of more than 100 tendons, muscles, and ligaments, to say nothing of blood vessels and nerves.



For reasons that are difficult to understand, many people, including a lot of older people, believe it is normal for the feet to hurt and simply resign themselves to enduring foot problems that could be treated.

There are more than 300 foot ailments. Some can be traced to heredity, but for an aging population, most of these ailments stem from the cumulative effect of years of neglect or abuse. Even among people in their retirement years, many foot problems can be treated successfully and the pain of foot ailments relieved.

Whether caused by neglect or abuse, the normal wear and tear of the years causes changes in feet. As persons age, their feet tend to spread and lose the fatty pads that cushion the bottom of the feet. Additional weight can affect the bone and ligament structure.

Common Foot Problems

Fungal and bacterial conditions, including athlete's foot, occur because feet spend a lot of time in shoes – a warm, dark, humid place that is perfect for fungus to grow. To prevent infections, keep your feet – especially the area between your toes – clean and dry.

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Dry skin can cause itching and burning feet. Use mild soap in small amounts and a moisturizing cream or lotion on your legs and feet every day.

Corns and calluses are caused by friction and pressure when the bony parts of your feet rub against your shoes. If you have corns or calluses, see your doctor.

Warts are skin growths caused by viruses. They are sometimes painful and, if untreated, may spread. Since over-the-counter preparations rarely cure warts, see your doctor.

Bunions develop when the joints in your big toe no longer fit together as they should and become swollen and tender. Bunions tend to run in families.

Ingrown toenails occur when a piece of the nail breaks the skin, which can happen if you don't cut your nails properly. Ingrown toenails are very common in the large toes. Ingrown toenails can often be avoided by cutting the toenail straight across and level with the top of the toe.

Hammertoe is caused by a shortening of the tendons that control toe movements. The toe knuckle is usually enlarged, drawing the toe back. Over time, the joint enlarges and stiffens as it rubs against shoes.

Spurs are calcium growths that develop on bones of your feet. They are caused by muscle strain in the feet. Standing for long periods, wearing poorly fitting shoes, or being overweight can make spurs worse.

Benefits of Prevention

Preventive health care brings many benefits to the feet. Chief among them are that it can increase comfort, limit the possibility of additional medical problems, reduce the chances of hospitalization because of infection, and lessen requirements for other institutional care.

The components of your feet work together, sharing the tremendous pressures of daily living. An average day of walking, for example, brings a force equal to several

hundred tons to bear on the feet. This helps explain why the feet are more subject to injury than any other part of the body.

Foot ailments are among the most common of health problems. Although some can be traced to heredity, many stem from the cumulative impact of a lifetime of abuse and neglect. Studies show that 75 percent of Americans experience foot problems at some time in their lives; nowhere near that many seek medical treatment, apparently because they mistakenly believe that discomfort and pain are normal and expected. To keep your feet healthy, you should be familiar with the most common ills that affect them. Self-treatment can often turn a minor problem into a major one and is generally not advisable.

Practical Preventive Steps

Practice good foot care. Check your feet regularly, or have a member of your family check them. Podiatrists and primary care doctors (internists and family practitioners) are qualified to treat most foot problems. Sometimes, the special skills of an orthopedic surgeon or dermatologist are needed.

What you can do:

- Wash your feet daily. Rinse off all soap and dry them thoroughly, especially between toes.
- Trim nails straight across and not too short. Don't cut out or dig at corners.
- Do not trim, shave, or use over-the-counter medicines to dissolve corns or calluses.
- Change socks or stockings daily. Don't wear any that are too short or too tight.
- Wear shoes that fit.

It also helps to keep blood circulating to your feet as much as possible.

Do this by putting your feet up when you are sitting or lying down, stretching if you've had to sit for a long while, walking, having a gentle foot massage, or taking a warm foot bath. Try not to expose your feet to cold temperatures.



Don't sit for long periods. If you have poor circulation, don't cross your legs and don't smoke (smoking narrows the blood vessels). Do get regular exercise. Keep your feet warm but avoid direct heat such as hot water bottles. Poor circulation reduces sensitivity, and your skin may burn without your realizing it.

Stretch your calf and heel muscles every day to keep them in tip-top shape and to reduce the risk of injury. Stand with your feet hip-width apart and slightly bend the knees. Then take one step forward, keeping your front leg bent and back leg straight. Both feet should be flat on the floor. As you lean forward you should feel your calf and heel muscles stretching. Hold for around 30 seconds on each leg. You may want to hold on to the back of a chair to help maintain balance.

Select Proper Shoes

The wrong shoes can cause or aggravate foot ailments. The right shoes can often prevent – but cannot correct – problems. So wearing the right shoes is vital to foot health. Follow these guidelines when you buy shoes. Be sure they measure up.



Shoe Construction

- Leather is best because it breathes like skin and molds to your foot. But cheaper canvas is fine for fast-growing children.
- Soles should be strong and flexible and have a good gripping surface.
- Insoles should be cushioned to absorb the jolts of walking on hard surfaces.
- Arch supports distribute weight over a wider area. Rigid shanks also give added support.
- High heels are fun and look good, but they should not be worn too long at a time or for much walking. Besides cramping the toes, they change body posture, making backaches more likely.

The Right Fit

- Only you can tell if shoes fit. If they aren't comfortable, don't buy them!
- Don't plan on shoes stretching with wear. If you already own shoes that are too tight, ask your shoe repair shop if they can be stretched.
- Because feet spread with age, have your feet measured every time you buy shoes. Both feet should be measured because they are often different sizes. Always buy shoes for the biggest foot.
- Go shoe shopping late in the afternoon, when feet swell to their largest.
- Size depends on shoe make and style, too. Don't insist you always wear one size if another feels better.
- The toe box should be roomy enough so you can wiggle all your toes.
- Your forefoot should NOT be wider than your shoe.
- The heel should fit snugly, and the instep should not gape open.
- If you can't find shoes that fit, ask your doctor for advice.

The human foot is a biological masterpiece. Its strong, flexible, and functional design enables it to do its job well and without complaint – if you take care of it and don't take it for granted.

Your feet carry you 150,000 miles in an average lifetime. Make sure yours stay healthy and happy!

References

American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society

www.aofas.org

American Podiatric Medical Association

1-800-FOOTCARE

www.apma.org

Footcare Direct

www.footcaredirect.com/gen_tips.html

National Institute on Aging

1-800-222-2225

www.nih.gov/nia