

Information for patients

North East Essex Community Services Collaborative

Foot care for people with diabetes

How can diabetes affect your feet?

Neuropathy

Neuropathy is the name given to damage to the nerves in the feet. It is a common complication with diabetes, and once damage has occurred, it cannot be reversed. It can lead to dry skin, discomfort, pain and deformity. Loss of sensation makes the feet feel numb and cold. This makes them vulnerable to injury, often leading to foot ulcers.

Poor blood supply

Ischaemia is the name for a lack of oxygen to the skin. This occurs when arteries to the lower leg become narrow or blocked, so blood cannot easily flow. This is known as peripheral arterial disease (PAD). If the circulation is poor, any injury to the skin may struggle to heal. Gangrene occurs when the skin dies due to the blood flow being completely obstructed. Smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol make the circulation worse.

If your leg arteries become blocked, it is often a sign that your heart and other arteries are at risk, increasing the risk of a heart attack and stroke.

Infection

Diabetes alters the body's ability to fight infection. This means that not only are the feet more prone to infection, but also it is more difficult to get rid of infections once they have established.

You should seek medical advice from your GP, nurse or podiatrist straight away if your feet show any signs of infection, such as pain, swelling, redness, pus or heat.

Deformity

Feet suffer much wear and tear in general daily living. Even when sitting, pressure against the ground or footwear can cause problems. Deformities in feet, such as bunions or hammer toes, can increase the risk of rubbing, blisters and pressure areas when wearing footwear. This can lead to corns, calluses, and ulcers.

Remember!

It is very important to look closely at your feet every day.

Footwear

Ill-fitting footwear can cause abrasions to the feet. It is important to ensure that your footwear fits well (is long enough/wide enough/deep enough). If you have sensory loss, it can be hard to feel if your shoes do not fit, so you should have your feet measured to ensure correct sizing.

Shoes should have a good fastening, such as laces or Velcro, to help minimise movement of your foot within the shoe. Friction and stresses can cause blisters, or over long periods, corns and calluses. Excessive pressure over an area can cause the skin to break down and ulcerate.

Try to wear hosiery with the smallest possible seam, or wear them inside-out. Thick seams can damage fragile skin. Make sure these are soft, do not restrict your circulation and are not too tight around your toes or ankles. Wear socks or hosiery made of cotton (better for hot feet) or wool (better for cold feet) and change them on a daily basis. If you wear thick socks or hosiery in the winter, ensure your footwear can accommodate them.

Before putting on your shoes, check inside and the sole for loose objects and rough areas. If you have lost sensation in your feet, do not walk around barefoot.

Hygiene

- Wash your feet every day.
- Do not soak your feet.
- Dry your feet thoroughly, especially between your toes.

Nail care

- Cut your nail to the shape of your toe. Do not cut down the sides, as this may cause an ingrown toenail.
- Do not cut your nails too short.
- Gently file your nails to remove any rough edges.

Your skin

- Apply a moisturising cream every day, avoiding the area between your toes.
- Check your skin for any cuts, blisters or cracks. Do not ignore minor injuries (see 'first aid' overleaf).
- **Do not** use medicated corn plasters, pull off hard skin, or use anything sharp to remove corns or calluses yourself.
- Corns and calluses (hard skin) should be treated by a podiatrist.

Please ask if you need this leaflet in an alternative format.

If you are unable to manage your own foot care, consider private podiatry or chiropody. The Podiatry Department does not provide routine basic nail care.

Signs of danger / first aid

- Check your feet every day for redness, swelling, colour change, broken skin, discharge, significant change in shape, increase in temperature or pain.
- Cover any cuts, grazes or blisters with a sterile dressing.
- Seek medical advice as soon as possible.

Do not delay if you have a foot problem, or you are concerned about your foot health. Problems that are dealt with in the early stages may help prevent future deterioration. Help and advice can be obtained from your doctor, nurse or podiatrist.

Further information

For further information, visit <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes/complications/feet>