

# AgePage

## Foot Care

*When Lenny fell in love, he said he was “swept off his feet.” When Abdul wasn’t sure about retiring, his wife said he had “cold feet.” Lilliana was so sensible; her kids always said she had “both feet on the ground.” Everyone agrees it’s important to put “your best foot forward.”*

Be kind to your feet. Years of wear and tear can be hard on them. So can disease, bad circulation, poorly trimmed toenails, and wearing shoes that don’t fit. Foot problems are sometimes the first sign of more serious medical conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, and nerve or circulatory disorders.

### Step in the Right Direction

Practice good foot care. Take a look at your feet often; use a mirror to look at the bottoms of your feet. Look for cuts, blisters, and ingrown toenails. Ask

a member of your family for help if you need it. If you have diabetes, be sure to check your feet every day.

Remember to put your feet up when you are sitting down. This helps the circulation in your feet. So can stretching, walking, or having a gentle foot massage. A warm foot bath is also helpful. Make sure your feet are dry before you put on your shoes. Wear shoes when you’re outside. If you are sitting for a long time, stand up and move around every now and then. If you cross your legs, reverse or uncross them often. Don’t smoke.

If you have a problem with your feet, your family doctor can help, or you can see a doctor who treats feet, called a podiatrist.

### Make Sure The Shoes Fit

Wearing comfortable shoes that fit well can prevent many foot problems. Here are some tips for making sure your shoes fit:

- ◆ Shoe size may change as you age, so always have your feet measured before buying shoes. The best time to measure your feet is at the end of the day when your feet are largest.
- ◆ Most of us have one foot that is larger than the other. Make sure your shoes fit your larger foot.

- ◆ Don't buy shoes without trying them on first. Shoe sizes can vary depending on the kind, make, and style. For example, the size you wear for sneakers may not be the same size you need for dress shoes.
- ◆ Walk in the shoes to make sure they feel right. The heel of the shoe should not slide up and down when you walk.
- ◆ Choose a shoe that is shaped like your foot. Styles with high heels or pointed toes can hurt your feet.
- ◆ Stand up when trying on shoes to make sure there is about ½ inch between your toe and the end of the shoe.
- ◆ Make sure the ball of your foot fits comfortably into the widest part of the shoe.
- ◆ Don't buy shoes that feel too tight and hope they will stretch.
- ◆ The upper part of the shoes should be made of a soft, flexible material.
- ◆ Soles should give solid footing and not slip. Thick soles cushion your feet when walking on hard surfaces.
- ◆ Low-heeled shoes are more comfortable, safer, and less damaging than high-heeled shoes.

## Something's Afoot: Common Problems

**Fungal infections**, such as athlete's foot, happen because our feet are in shoes most of the time. Shoes are warm,

dark, and moist—the perfect place for fungus to grow. A fungus can cause dry skin, redness, blisters, itching, and peeling. It can be hard to cure. Over-the-counter anti-fungal powders or creams can help. If your foot does not get better within 2–4 weeks, talk to your doctor.

To prevent infections:

- ◆ Keep your feet clean and dry. Be sure to dry the area between your toes.
- ◆ Change your shoes and socks or stockings often to help keep your feet dry.
- ◆ Don't buy tight shoes.
- ◆ Try dusting your feet every day with talc-free foot powder.

**Dry skin** can cause itching and burning feet. Use mild soap in small amounts and a cream or lotion on your legs and feet every day. Be careful about adding oils to bath water since they can make your feet and bathtub very slippery.

**Corns and calluses** are caused by pressure when the bony parts of your feet rub against your shoes. Corns usually appear on the tops or sides of toes while calluses form on the soles of feet. Wearing shoes that fit better or using non-medicated pads may help. While bathing, gently rub the corn or callus with a washcloth or pumice stone to help

reduce the size. To avoid infection, do not try to shave off the corn or callus. See your doctor, especially if you have diabetes or circulation problems.

**Warts** are skin growths caused by viruses. They may be painful and can spread if not treated. Some over-the-counter products may help to get rid of warts. See your doctor for treatment.

**Bunions** are swollen and tender joints that can develop at the base of your big toes. They tend to run in families. Bunions can also be caused by shoes that are too small or have pointed toes. If a bunion is not too painful, wearing shoes cut wide at the toes and middle part of the foot (instep) or shoe inserts may help. Taping or padding the bunion may bring relief. Some over-the-counter pain medicine may lessen pain and reduce swelling. Talk to your doctor if you are in pain. Sometimes surgery is needed to relieve the pressure and repair the toe joint.

**Ingrown toenails** are caused by a piece of the nail piercing the skin. This can happen if you don't cut your toenails straight across so the corner of the nail can be seen above the skin. Use clippers made to cut toenails. Ingrown toenails are very common in the large toes. A doctor can remove the part of the nail that is cutting into the skin.

**Neuromas** are the result of a build-up of tissue around an inflamed nerve in the foot. They may cause tingling, numbness, or pain in the ball of your foot and toes. This may cause you to lose your balance. Shoes that are too narrow or have high heels can make the problem worse. See your doctor. Sometimes, inserts put in your shoes can help.

**Hammertoe** is caused by a shortening of the tendons that control toe movements. The toe joint grows and pulls the toe back. Over time, the joint gets bigger and stiffens as it rubs against shoes. This can affect your balance. More space in the shoe or stocking can help. In very serious cases, surgery may be needed.

**Spurs** are bony bumps that grow on bones of your feet. They are caused by stress on the feet. Standing for long periods of time, wearing badly fitting shoes, or being overweight can make spurs worse. Sometimes spurs are painless. At other times, they can hurt. Treatments for spurs include foot supports, heel pads, and heel cups. Sometimes surgery is needed.

**Swollen feet** may happen when you have been standing for a long time. If your feet and ankles stay swollen, it may be a sign of more serious health problems. See your doctor for a check-up.

## Be Alert

Both diabetes and peripheral artery disease can cause poor blood flow to the feet, which can cause scrapes or bruises to become infected more easily. This makes good foot care very important. Make sure to check with your doctor if you develop a sore on your foot that does not heal.

## Don't Get Off on the Wrong Foot

Good foot care and regular foot checks are an important part of your health care. Your doctor should look at your feet often. If you have foot problems, don't be afraid to talk to your doctor.

## For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

### **American Podiatric Medical Association**

9312 Old Georgetown Road  
Bethesda, MD 20814-1621  
1-800-275-2762 (toll-free)

[www.apma.org](http://www.apma.org)

### **American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society**

6300 North River Road, Suite 510  
Rosemont, IL 60018  
1-800-235-4855 (toll-free)

[www.aofas.org](http://www.aofas.org)

For more information about health and aging, contact:

### **National Institute on Aging Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057  
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057  
1-800-222-2225  
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol](http://www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol)

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from the NIA, go to

[www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation](http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation).

Visit NIHSeniorHealth

([www.nihseniorhealth.gov](http://www.nihseniorhealth.gov)), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults.

There are also special features that make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



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