

# Taking Care of Your Feet



*When we are in love, we may be "swept off our feet." When we don't want to do something, we are said to have "cold feet." A sensible person "has both feet on the ground." Sometimes we even "vote with our feet."*

It's important to put "your best foot forward." Be kind to your feet. Years of wear and tear can be hard on feet. So can disease, bad circulation, poorly trimmed toenails, and wearing shoes that don't fit right. 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. Check your feet often, or have a member of your family check them. If you have a problem with your feet, your family doctor can help or you can see a podiatrist (doctor who treats feet). Sometimes, the special skills of an orthopedic surgeon or dermatologist are needed.

One easy step to take is to remember to put your feet up when you are sitting down. This helps keep blood moving to your feet. So can stretching, walking, or having a gentle foot massage. A warm foot bath is also helpful, but make sure your feet are dry before you put on your shoes. Try to avoid pressure from shoes that don't fit. Don't sit for a long time or keep your legs crossed for too long. Don't smoke.

## Make Sure the Shoes Fit

Protect your feet by wearing shoes whenever you go outdoors. 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; fit your shoe to your larger foot.
- Don't buy shoes by the size without trying them on first. The size marked inside the shoe may not fit you.
- Walk in the shoes to make sure they feel right.
- Choose a shoe that is shaped like your foot. Styles like high heels or pointed toes can hurt 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 that they will stretch.
- The heel of the shoe should not slide up and down on your heel when you walk.
- The upper part of the shoes should be made of a soft, bendable material to match the shape of your foot.
- 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.

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## 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.

**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. Wearing shoes that fit better or using special pads may help. You may feel better if you use some over-the-counter medicines, but they do not treat the cause of the problem. See your doctor, especially if you have diabetes or circulation problems.

**Warts** are skin growths caused by viruses. They are sometimes painful and may spread if not treated. Over-the-counter products rarely cure warts, so you may need to see your doctor.

**Bunions** develop when the joints in your big toe no longer fit together. They become swollen and tender. Bunions tend to run in families. If a bunion is not too painful, wearing shoes cut wide at the toes and instep (middle part of the foot), taping the foot, or wearing pads that cushion the bunion may help. Physical therapy and shoe inserts can bring relief. See your doctor. Medicines can help with pain. Sometimes surgery is needed to relieve the pressure and repair the toe joint.

**Ingrown toenails** are caused by a piece of the nail breaking 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 so the area can heal.

**Hammertoe** is caused by a shortening of the tendons that control toe movements. The toe knuckle 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 calcium 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 are foot supports, heel pads, and heel cups. Sometimes surgery is needed.

**Swollen feet** may be a sign of more serious health problems. If you continue to have swollen feet and ankles, see your doctor.

## Stay on Your Toes

If you have diabetes or peripheral artery disease, good foot care is very important. Both diseases can cause poor blood flow to the feet. Scrapes or bruises can become infected. Make sure your doctor checks your feet.

## 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, be sure to talk to your doctor.

Source: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/footcare.htm>

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