

REACT OF FEET

A Guide to Keeping Feet Healthy and Happy

A resource for care home staff and
other healthcare providers



Why is it important to look after our feet?

It usually isn't until we have a problem with our feet that we realise just how important a role they play in our daily lives. Our feet are amazing structures - there are 26 bones in each foot with more than 30 small joints and many muscles, tendons, nerves and ligaments that all work together to keep us moving.

Our feet play an essential role in all weight-bearing activities as they provide the only source of contact with the ground. Whether standing still or moving, our feet provide balance and stability for our bodies. When on the move, our feet contribute to shock absorption, adapt to uneven surfaces, and facilitate the forward propulsion of our bodies. We use our feet to sense the ground, testing all the time to see if the surface is safe or not to walk on.



When our feet develop problems it can seriously affect our mobility and therefore increase the risk of falling.



Problems with our feet can mean poor posture when moving or even standing that can lead to back, hip and knee issues. The less mobile we are the more prone to health issues we become, both with our feet and other parts of our bodies.



Pain and discomfort combined with a loss of mobility can cause depression and low self esteem.

As you can see, looking after our feet, and the feet of those we care for, can make a real difference to our overall wellbeing.

Who is most at risk of developing problems with their feet?

When we are caring for an elderly resident, patient or loved one, key factors we must consider are the specific issues related to ageing. As we get older, we naturally develop more problems with our feet due to the normal daily wear and tear of our joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments. Also our skin starts to become thinner, dryer and loses its elasticity making it more likely for us to develop wounds, cracks and sores. Another issue is that our feet get wider and longer as we get older, so it is important to check that any footwear fits properly. Foot pain affects approximately one in four older people and impairs mobility, increasing the risk factor for falls.

Other conditions we should also consider that can affect the health of our feet:

- having a disability that causes our feet to be immobile
- changes in bone structure of our feet
- having diabetes
- suffering with arthritis
- having circulatory problems
- having a lack of feeling
- already having a history of wounds or skin problems on our feet

What can go wrong with our feet?

Pain

With any foot pain we must understand:

- it can affect our mobility making it a serious risk factor for falls
- that it's difficult to maintain a good walking style and posture which can cause issues with our backs, hips and knees
- that all of this can have a negative effect on our overall mood and general wellbeing

Sores and ulcers

Small areas of broken skin can develop into much larger sores if not treated properly.

Corns and callouses

Areas of hard skin can press on the tissue underneath them and cause sores to develop under the callous. They can also become very uncomfortable and affect mobility.

Pressure damage

Pressure can come from a number of areas - tight footwear or splints if left in place too long, friction damage from shoes that rub, toes pressing on each other. Bony areas or heels pressing on a foot stool, bed or bed base if someone is unable to change their position.

Infection

If there is a break in the skin then this is an area where a bacterial or fungal infection can get into the tissue and cause an infection or cellulitis.

Toe nail problems

Toe nails can grow inwards, which can become painful if they become too long and can lead to them digging into the surrounding tissues or other toes. Toe nails can also develop fungal infections leading to thick, crumbly and discoloured nails.

Dry cracked heels

Very dry skin on the heels can become cracked and form deeper fissures which are painful.

Bone deformity

Conditions such as arthritis, bunions and hammer toes can result in protruding areas that are more vulnerable to pressure. These conditions can be exacerbated by poor footwear such as high heels and slip on shoes.

Swelling

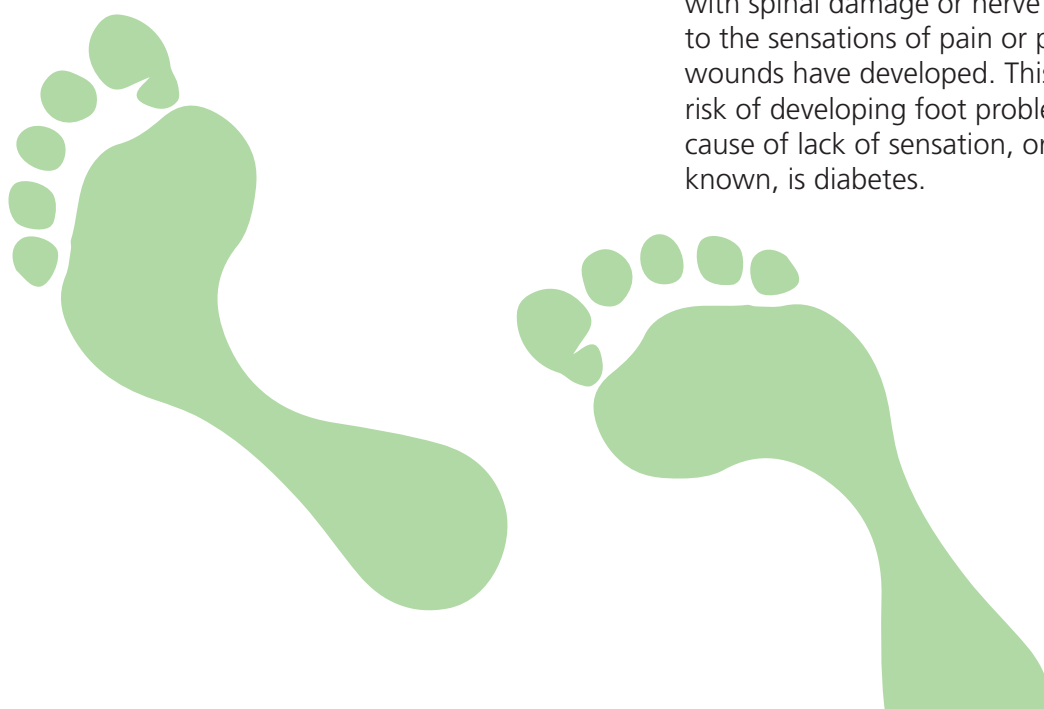
Swelling in the feet will cause heaviness, pain and increase the risks of wounds and infections. Waterlogged tissues are susceptible to pressure and footwear problems will increase.

Poor circulation

People with poor circulation to their feet will be getting less blood and therefore oxygen to the tissues. This can cause dry skin, crumbling toe nails, pain and wounds that do not heal. Patients with diabetes, stroke, heart problems and those who smoke are at higher risk of this happening.

Lack of sensation

Anyone who cannot feel their feet, such as people with spinal damage or nerve problems, will not react to the sensations of pain or pressure or know if wounds have developed. This puts them at a higher risk of developing foot problems. The most common cause of lack of sensation, or neuropathy as it is known, is diabetes.



What can we do to look after our feet?

We have seen who is most at risk of developing problems with their feet and the kind of conditions we are most likely to encounter. But, of course there are lots of things that we can all do to help prevent and manage foot related problems.

Keep nails short

Filing toenails once a week can keep nails in good condition and avoid the need for cutting. This is particularly helpful for people with thick nails that would be difficult to cut. The best way to file nails is to sit in front of the feet, and then file in one direction, towards yourself, to avoid pulling the nail back and causing any discomfort.



Keep skin and heels well hydrated

Applying moisturising cream daily can dramatically improve the condition of skin and make it less likely that cracks, or fissures will occur. In vulnerable patients, cracks in the skin can deteriorate into open wounds and ulcers and become very painful, so this is one of the best things you can do to protect and care for feet. Regular creaming can also reduce pain from calluses and corns and sometimes prevent them from occurring all together. Any off the shelf moisturiser will do, although if skin remains dry despite regular application, contact your patient's health care professional, as they may require a more intensive cream on prescription. Remember **not to use aqueous cream**. This is sometimes mistaken for a moisturiser when it is in fact a soap substitute and it will not provide adequate moisturisation.



Check all areas of the foot for skin breaks with a mirror

It is important that any skin breaks or wounds have a dry dressing applied straight away, to try and prevent infection. Advice should be sought from a healthcare professional if there are any concerns. Foot wounds can become serious quickly, especially in people with diabetes. Foot wounds should be kept dry, which may mean using devices to enable people to bathe without getting their foot wet.



Prevent legs from swelling

Leg swelling can be very uncomfortable and puts people at greater risk of developing foot problems. It can be helpful to elevate legs using a reclining chair, or a foot stool placed under the leg, to reduce swelling.



If patients use compression stockings, make sure they are applied properly and fit correctly. Stockings that don't fit well or are put on incorrectly can dig into toes and other areas and cause injuries.

Prevent pressure on heels and areas of the feet

Pressure sores on feet can become very serious. They are more likely in people with limited mobility, or who are frail or lack sensation. Prevention is far better than cure for pressure sores and it is very important to off-load vulnerable areas. This may be done with pressure mattresses or cushions as well as other devices, and by regular repositioning.



Keep circulation to feet flowing as much as possible

Walking is the best exercise; however, if people are not able to walk, simple foot and toe exercises can be helpful. No special training is needed. Try sitting and lifting toes up towards the nose and repeating. Then try lifting heels up and going on to tip toes and repeating. This can be repeated as many times as is comfortable.





Measure feet and check shoe size

It's very important that people wear well fitting shoes and slippers. Poorly fitting footwear is a very common cause of foot problems. Sometimes people's feet spread and get larger as they get older, so foot size might change over time. You can check that shoes or slippers fit well by pushing down over the toe box to check toes are not too close to the front of the shoe. Ideally there should be a fingers width of room at the front of the shoe. It's always best to check shoe fit with feet on the ground. To check that shoes are wide enough, you can remove the insole from many shoes and hold it up to the bottom of the foot. If any of the foot or toes are hanging over the side, it means the shoe is not wide enough.

As well as checking the fit of the shoe, choosing an appropriate style of shoe is also very important. Slip on shoes and slippers often have a narrower toe box, which can rub on toes. Because slip on shoes offer less support and do not hold the foot in place whilst walking, they often move and cause friction. This can cause rubbing and in some cases lead to wounds. When choosing a shoe or slipper, choose one with a fastening. Velcro or lace up are both fine. Shoes with a round, wide toe box are a better choice than those with a narrow pointed toe. High heeled shoes put pressure on the ball of the foot and can lead to foot pain, corns and calluses. A shoe with a low or flat sole is far less likely to cause these problems.



Treat foot problems

Some common foot problems, such as athlete's foot, can be treated with over the counter remedies. If a condition such as this is suspected, consider talking to your pharmacist for advice on treatment. If symptoms don't settle, consult a healthcare professional.



Check for developing lack of sensation

Residents with lack of sensation should not walk in bare feet as they may not feel if they stand on anything sharp which could become embedded in their foot. They are also more likely to develop pressure sores on their feet, even if they are not immobile. One way to check if people have lost feeling in their feet is called the **Ipswich Touch Test** and it can be done by anyone, even without any special training. Instructions on how to perform this test can be found towards the end of the React To Feet film at:

www.reactto.co.uk



Infections

Infections in the feet can become serious if not treated. If redness, inflammation, pain, heat or swelling occur, these could be signs of infection, especially in the presence of an open wound. Infection can spread from the foot up the leg and requires referral to a medical professional for treatment. **If you suspect infection, seek advice straight away.**



Remember - Pain is an indication that something is wrong. Therefore, as well as taking pain killing medication, seek help to investigate the cause of the pain and always refer to healthcare professionals if problems develop or persist.

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To view the training films and access
all accompanying resources visit:

www.reactto.co.uk

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