

# Feet - Looking after yourself as you get older

- Your feet are designed to **support your entire body**. They make it possible for you to walk, run, jump and dance, they are sensitive enough to detect the softest of touches and yet tough enough to withstand the harshest conditions. Your feet aren't just for walking, they provide you with a sense of balance and posture and are essential for your overall health.
- If you walk around **8,000 steps** a day and live an average lifespan you'll walk over 100,000 miles, that's enough to circle the Earth 4 times!
- **Each foot contains 125,000 sweat glands** which help keep your body cool. These sweat glands can produce a cup of moisture every day. While the human body is made up of 206 bones, 52 of them are found in your feet – that's **26 bones in each foot**, each foot also has 33 joints and over 100 muscles, ligaments and tendons.
- **Most people have 5 toes** - your big toe has only 2 bones while your other toes have 3 each. Your toes are essential for balance, movement and weight bearing as their nerves send signals to the brain to control these activities, without toes your feet wouldn't work at all. Toes constantly touch the ground as you move, but your big toes are the ones in charge. As they press down they alert the brain that you are well balanced and ready to go. They also act as springs to push you off and keep you stable. If your big toe is injured or misaligned in any way you'll struggle to balance or even walk.
- **People's feet are getting bigger** – this is because people in general are getting bigger, and they have to support the extra weight. Your feet grow throughout your childhood from age 1 – 2 they double in size every 2 months, then they slow down and stop growing at 20, however in your 40's they tend to flatten and elongate. They also grow slightly during pregnancy. Over 60% of people have feet that differ in size, and often toes on one foot can be longer, the width of feet can vary, arches can be higher or lower and heels can be narrower.
- **Your feet are the most ticklish part of your body**, (even though the thickest skin on your body is found on the soles of your feet) because they have almost 8,000 nerves with lots of nerve endings near the surface – these nerve endings are often a good indicator of overall health. If you don't feel anything much when tickled it may indicate nerve or tissue damage – a sign that you should talk to your GP.
- **Toenails** Your toe nails grow around 1mm per month, finger nails grow about 3 times faster, that's one reason toenails are thicker than fingernails. **An ingrown toenail** is a common problem where the nail grows into the toe, it can be very painful and it is usually on your big toe. Your toe may be red, swollen and painful, the nail may curve into your toe, it can become infected with pus coming out of it and you may feel hot and shivery. Do not pick at the nail. **To prevent ingrown toenails** you should cut straight across the nail, not the edges; do not cut the nails too short, try not to wear shoes that are too tight or don't fit properly, keep feet clean and dry them properly.

A pharmacist can give treatments to ease the pain, but you should consult a GP if the toe becomes swollen or painful, if you develop a fever or if you have diabetes as **foot problems can be more serious if you have diabetes**. A **podiatrist** is a foot specialist may offer treatment by cutting away part of the nail or even remove the whole nail

- **Fungal nail infections** usually affect your toenails but you can also get them on your fingernails. Fungal nail infections develop when your feet are constantly warm and damp, they sometimes start at the edge of the nail, the infection spreads to the middle of the nail, making it discoloured and sometimes thicker in parts. The nail can become brittle and pieces can break off or the whole nail lifts off. A pharmacist may suggest an antifungal nail cream – it can take up to 12 months to cure the infection; or a nail softening cream which will soften the nail so the infected part can be filed off, the infection is cured when you see healthy nail growing back from the base. See a GP if the infection is severe or spreads to other nails.
- **Athlete's Foot** is a common fungal infection that affects the feet, one of the main symptoms is itchy, white patches between the toes, it can also cause sore and flaky patches on your feet, the skin can look red. It can also affect the soles or sides of your feet and sometimes causes fluid –filled blisters. If not treated the infection can spread to your toenails. Athlete's foot is unlikely to get better on its own, you can buy special creams, sprays and powders at the pharmacy and may need to try a few treatments to find one that works for you. It is important to keep your feet clean and dry – especially between your toes. **Athlete's foot is contagious** so use a separate towel, take your shoes off when you get home , change your socks daily and remember cotton socks are best. See your GP if treatments from the pharmacy don't work, if you have diabetes or the infection spreads to other parts of your body.
- **If buying treatment for athletes foot check that the treatment contains Terbinafine Hydrochloride which has been successful in clinical trials.**
- **Smelly feet** You have 125,000 sweat glands in your feet, while they help keep you cool they can also be the cause of smelly feet because those sweat glands create fluid, however it's not the fluids that make your feet smell, bacteria likes to make their home on warm, sweaty feet and survive on the dead skin cells and oils on the feet. Bacteria create acids as a result and these acids have a foul odour. If you don't want your feet to stink, wash and dry them daily, dry especially between the toes, keep them cool by wearing clean, cotton socks.
- **Tips for fresh feet – Soak feet in a mix of white or apple cider vinegar 2:1 water to vinegar. Tea tree oil or surgical spirit applied between the toes at bedtime will also help kill bacteria. Anti-bacterial soaps and powders can also help.**

## Feet part 2 / Looking After Yourself as you get Older.

(All health advice checked with NHS.UK)

People frequently may experience pain in different parts of the feet such as ankle pain, heel pain, toe pain, pain in the top of the foot, pain in the bottom of the foot or pain in the ball of the foot. NHS advice for mild pains will include rest, taking pain killers (paracetamol or ibuprofen tablets or gel), using ice packs, keeping foot elevated and not doing strenuous exercise. A pharmacist can advise however if the pains persist and you have trouble walking or you develop tingling or loss of sensation then of course you should book a GP appointment, or call 111 for advice. **Anyone with diabetes needs to take special care with their feet and should have regular foot health checks.**

**Corns and Verrucae** are common complaints that affect feet. Corns and verrucae tend to be circular in shape and are a different colour to the rest of your skin. They are both typically found on the soles of your feet and toes. A corn is a roundish area of dense, hard skin they can be flat or raised and are usually smaller than a pea. They tend to appear on the part of your foot that is repeatedly exposed to friction or pressure from tight or high heeled shoes. A pharmacist can advise on home treatment.

**A verrucae** can grow larger than a corn, they are the result of being infected by certain strains of the Human papillomavirus (HPV), which is often picked up by walking barefoot over a contaminated floor such as a gym or pool area. Verrucae are very contagious and a pharmacist will advise on the best treatments. If you suffer from persistent verrucae or corn problems, make an appointment with a chiropodist / podiatrist, GP surgeries may have a list of recommended practitioners in your local area.

**Gout** is a form of inflammatory arthritis which occurs in the big toe. It is caused by an excess of uric acid which crystallises in the joint and leads to swelling and intense pain. It sometimes runs in families. It's more common in men, especially as they get older. You **should seek treatment from a GP** if you feel an attack starting where they will give advice on pain relief and a healthier diet.

You might have a higher chance of getting gout if you:

- are overweight or drink alcohol
- have had surgery or an injury
- have been through the menopause
- take medicines such as diuretics (water tablets), or medicines for high blood pressure (such as ACE inhibitors)
- have high cholesterol, high blood pressure, kidney problems, osteoarthritis or diabetes.

You might get a gout attack if you:

- have an illness that causes a high temperature
- drink too much alcohol or eat a very large, fatty meal
- get dehydrated
- injure a joint or take certain medicines.

### **Hair loss or cold feet**

If you notice the hair on your feet or legs starting to disappear you should have a check with a podiatrist or health advisor as it may be due to high blood pressure. If you have persistently cold feet you may be suffering from circulatory condition and you should seek medical advice.

### **Ulcers, Sores, Swelling**

Persistent wounds or sores that refuse to heal should always be taken seriously . They can indicate a variety of issues from diabetes to circulation problems. They won't resolve themselves so you must seek medical advice.

Arthritis affects the joints in the feet and swelling may be a sign of inflammation as the cartilage and tissues of the joints wear out. Swollen feet may indicate circulation issues associated with diabetes and heart conditions although poorly fitting shoes can also make feet swell so the best course of action if you have any concerns is to check with a podiatrist or seek medical advice at GP surgery.

**Plantar Fasciitis** - Plantar fasciitis is pain on the bottom of your foot, around your heel and arch. It's more likely to be plantar fasciitis if:

- the pain is much worse when you start walking after sleeping or resting
- the pain feels better during exercise, but returns after resting
- it's difficult to raise your toes off the floor

### **Home treatment**

- rest and raise your foot on a stool when you can
- put an ice pack (or bag of frozen peas) in a towel on the painful area for up to 20 minutes every 2 to 3 hours
- wear shoes with cushioned heels and good arch support
- use insoles or heel pads in your shoes
- try regular gentle stretching exercises
- try exercises that do not put pressure on your feet, such as swimming
- take painkillers like paracetamol and ibuprofen
- try to lose weight if you're overweight

## See the GP if

- you have pain in the bottom of your foot that is severe or stopping you doing normal activities
- the pain is getting worse or keeps coming back
- the pain has not improved after treating it yourself for 2 weeks
- you have any tingling or loss of feeling in your foot
- you have diabetes and foot pain – foot problems can be more serious if you have diabetes

If plantar fasciitis does not get better, a GP might refer you to a physiotherapist or foot specialist (podiatrist). A physiotherapist can show you exercises to help ease your symptoms. A podiatrist can recommend things like insoles and the right shoes to wear.

## Home treatments to keep your feet happy!

Soaking your feet in a warm foot bath can alleviate tiredness, aching muscles and minor complaints such as rough or dry skin. Adding Epsom salt and essential oils such as tea tree oil, (antifungal and antibacterial properties); lavender oil (stress relieving); peppermint oil (a natural deodorizer and cooling sensation); Eucalyptus (an effective muscle relaxant); can make feet feel revived.

Foot scrubs are an excellent way to exfoliate dead skin cells, you can make a DIY scrub by mixing 2 tablespoons of sea salt, with equal amounts of lemon juice and baby oil. Rub into your feet, between toes and ankles and then wash your feet in warm water. Oatmeal mixed with milk or rose water can also be used as a scrub. Vinegar foot baths can also help to treat dead skin – add 1 cup of vinegar to foot bath and soak for 10- to 15 minutes, then clean off the dry skin with a pumice stone. Dry thoroughly then apply foot lotion or petroleum jelly to moisturise feet. Tannic acid in black tea helps to combat the bacteria that causes foot odour. Using 2 teabags in hot water, then add to your foot bath and soak for 10 to 15 minutes.

**Always dry feet thoroughly, especially between your toes and moisturise with a hydrating foot lotion.**

To soften cuticles around your toes use petroleum jelly – Vaseline. Using socks after moisturising your feet at night helps with better absorption. **Warning** – always take care when stepping into the shower or bath after a hot foot treatment as oils, petroleum jelly and lotions can cause you to slip.

**There's no difference between a podiatrist and chiropodist, but podiatrist is a more modern name.** Podiatrists are healthcare professionals who have been trained to diagnose and treat abnormal conditions of the feet and lower limbs. They also prevent and correct deformity, keep people mobile and active, relieve pain and treat infections, and give advice.