

Keeping Your Feet On The Ground

According to the World Health Organization, 346 million people worldwide are diagnosed with diabetes at present time. It is estimated that in every 30 seconds, a leg is lost from amputation as a result of diabetes. However, 80% of these amputations can be prevented with proper diabetes control and foot care. Ng Chee Hong, Podiatrist, Singapore General Hospital, gives some tips on caring for your feet to prevent amputation.

How does diabetes affect your feet?

A person diagnosed with diabetes has an increased risk of developing peripheral vascular disease on their legs and feet. As the location of our feet is the furthest away from the heart, blood vessels are utilised to deliver blood to our feet. In a person with chronic diabetes, their blood vessels are often narrowed and go through a process whereby the blood vessel cell wall becomes hardened (arteriosclerosis). As a result, they may experience lack of blood flow to the feet. This can ultimately lead to damaged or fragile skin, poor soft tissue viability, neuropathy (lack of sensation from nerve damage), non-healing wounds, poor immunity and amputation.

A person living with diabetes with a poorly controlled blood sugar level is also susceptible to nerve damage (peripheral neuropathy). When this happens, the person may lose the sense of pressure, vibration, pain, changes in temperature, balance and position awareness. Thus, the ability of their skin to function as a protective mechanism fails. If they have a wound in their foot, they are often painless. On the other extreme, they may also present with chronic pain without a known cause.

How do you look after your feet and prevent complications?

Check your feet regularly

People with diabetes need to check their feet on a daily basis. If they encounter difficulty in checking their feet, they can use a mirror or request assistance from a caregiver or family member.

Visit a podiatrist at least once a year

People with diabetes should visit a podiatrist at least once a year. In cases where the person has foot problems such as hardened toe nails, fungal nails, thick corns/callus, wounds, ingrown toe nails or poor skin condition, they may be required visit the podiatrist more often.

Self-care for your feet

Apply emollients or moisturising creams daily to skin areas that are dry and thin. This will help to reduce the incidence of skin breaking which can lead to wound formation. An emollient with some urea content and Vitamin E is best for dry skin. Do not apply emollient in between your toes as this can promote fungal infection.

Wash your feet daily

It is important to use a mild antiseptic soap to wash your feet daily. This is a good habit because our feet come into contact with the dirt and germs on the ground every day. Cleaning our feet regularly reduces the risk of infection.

Choosing good footwear

Selecting appropriate footwear for your lifestyle and foot condition is very important. Wearing a closed-up shoe helps to protect our feet. Try choosing a shoe which has a soft upper, firm heel counter, stiff shank and with shoe laces or velcro strap. Better yet, try to wear a pair of diabetic shoe. These shoes are designed for people with diabetes and are usually seamless in order to prevent irritation.

Our feet are designed to support and keep us mobile for the rest of our lives. In ensuring they are healthy and well looked after, we can keep on walking and lead an active lifestyle.

