

HAPPY FEET

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Diabetic patients are more likely to be admitted to hospital with a foot ulcer than with any other complication of diabetes.

This is because diabetes may cause poor circulation and reduced feeling in the feet. It is important to understand how foot problems develop and how they can be prevented or detected early to avoid foot ulcers and amputation.

How can diabetes affect your feet?

If it is poorly controlled, diabetes can damage nerves and blood vessels. **Nerve damage is called neuropathy.**

There are three types of neuropathy, and all of them can affect your feet:

1. Sensory neuropathy

This affects the nerves from the skin, bones and muscles to the brain and affects how we sense temperature and pain. It is the most common form of neuropathy and can lead to a loss of feeling and an inability to sense pain. This could mean that you might develop a blister or minor burn without realising it, which, if not treated properly, could become infected or develop into an ulcer.

2. Motor neuropathy

This affects the nerves responsible for sending messages to the muscles about movements, such as walking. If the nerves supplying your feet are affected it could cause your feet to change shape. Your toes may become clawed (curled) as your arch/instep becomes more pronounced or the arch may 'fall' causing flat feet. This can cause the bones in your foot to fracture (break) when stressed.

3. Autonomic neuropathy

This affects the nerves which control activities such as sweating and temperature regulation. Damage to these nerves may affect your sweat glands, reducing secretions and making your skin dry and hard. If not looked after, the skin may crack and become prone to infection.

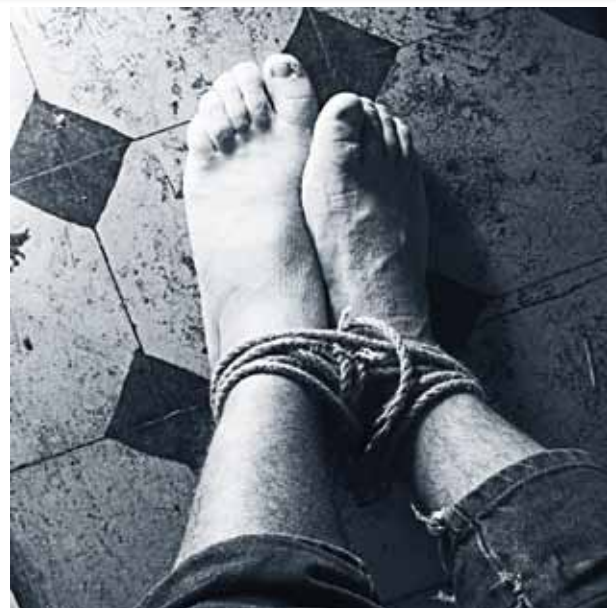
Circulation

Diabetes may also affect the blood circulation by causing the arteries to become 'furred up' (atherosclerosis). This can affect all the major blood vessels, especially those supplying the feet.

Without a good blood supply, you will have problems with cuts and sores, which do not heal very well, and as a result of poor circulation, you may also

suffer from cramp and pain in your legs and/or feet.

If your diabetes is poorly controlled, you run greater risk of poor circulation and the problems associated with a poor blood supply to your feet. High blood pressure, a high fat content in your diet and, in particular, smoking, all increase the risk of poor circulation.



What are the danger signs?

Swollen areas, changes in the colour of your skin or a slow-healing wound could indicate poor circulation, an infection, the early stages of an ulcer, or gangrene. Foot ulcers can be treated successfully, especially in the early stages. If they are left untreated, the risks of infection are high. The earlier the treatment, the more successful the outcome is likely to be.

Pain in the feet and legs should never be ignored. Your body is telling you that there is a problem. Even painless sores can be very serious and should not be ignored. Sores and cuts that do not heal are important danger signs. Seek immediate advice. Your diabetes may not be well controlled, you may have an infection or your circulation may have worsened. All of these can be successfully treated if discovered early.

Check your feet every day

If you notice any of the danger signs you should make an appointment with your doctor or health centre. Do not try to treat injuries, corns or other foot problems yourself. Seek professional help. Avoid using corn removal plasters because they contain acid which can cause the skin to break down.

SEEK HELP IF:

- you notice any of the foot health danger signs.
- you have had diabetes for many years and have never had your feet checked.
- you find it difficult to check or care for your feet.
- you have any questions about caring for your feet.

Signs of an infection on the skin

Colour	White skin will usually be bright pink or red; brown or black skin may become darker
Pain	The infected area may throb and be very painful (though this may not be the case if you have neuropathy)
Swelling	The infected area may be puffy and appear swollen
Movement	The pain and swelling may mean that it becomes difficult to move the infected area (though this may not be the case if you have neuropathy)
Temperature	The infected area may feel hot to the touch
Pus	The area may be weeping a yellow/green matter called pus; this consists of dead cells and micro-organisms

Why is sensitivity important?

Sensitivity is an important way that the body can alert you to other problems. Sensations, like sharp pain or throbbing, can tell you when you may have damage to a part of your body. In the case of feet, pain could be due to a burn, blister or cut and because you feel it you can take prompt action and appropriate treatment.

If sensation is impaired you may not realise if minor damage has occurred. If left unknown and untreated, the risk of infection is increased. Infections and ulcers are also painful – but not if that part of the foot also lacks sensation.

Knowing that you have impaired sensitivity requires you to rely more on regular visual checking for symptoms such as discolouration or swelling.

