

Diabetic Foot Care Advice Sheet

Foot care amongst diabetics is incredibly important, even small ulcers on the foot can represent a serious risk as they may heal extremely slowly and need rigorous treatment to cure. As a diabetic normal skin lubrication may be impaired and the feet may become dry and cracked. If nerve damage has occurred then pressure from walking and running may also go unfelt. As a result of these compounding factors complications may develop into neuropathic ulcers. To make matters more complicated, because the immune system may be damaged or not functioning correctly, these impediments may take longer to heal. Infections may quickly spread and become gangrenous. Ulcers can develop into serious lower body infections, with the possibility of amputation at an advanced stage.

However, caring for your feet as a diabetic is not difficult, and it should be a prime consideration.

What is a foot ulcer?

An ulcer is where an area of skin has broken down and you can see the underlying tissue. Most skin ulcers occur on the lower legs or feet. The skin normally heals quickly if it is cut. However, in some people with diabetes the skin on the feet does not heal so well and is prone to developing into an ulcer. This can be even after a mild injury such as stepping on a small stone with bare feet.

Why are people with diabetes prone to foot ulcers?

Foot ulcers are more common if you have diabetes because one or both of the following complications can develop:

Reduced sensation of the skin on your feet

Your nerves may not work as well as normal because even a slightly high blood sugar level can, over time, damage them. This is a complication of diabetes called peripheral neuropathy. If you lose sensation in parts of your feet, you may not know if you damage them, for example, if you tread on something sharp or develop a blister due to a tight shoe. This means that you are also more prone to problems such as minor cuts, bruises or blisters. Also, if you cannot feel pain so well from the foot, you do not protect these small wounds by not walking on them. Therefore, they can quickly become worse and develop into ulcers.

Narrowing of arteries (blood vessels) going to the feet

If you have diabetes you have an increased risk of developing narrowing of the arteries (peripheral vascular disease). This is caused by fatty deposits called atheroma that builds up on the inside lining of arteries (sometimes called furring of the arteries). This can reduce the blood flow to various parts of the body. The arteries in the legs are quite commonly affected and this can cause a reduced blood supply (poor circulation) to

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the feet. Skin with a poor blood supply does not heal as well as normal and is more likely to be damaged. Therefore, if you get a minor cut or injury, it may take longer to heal and be prone to becoming worse and developing into an ulcer. This is compounded if you also have reduced sensation as described above and are unaware of the wound.

What increases the risk of developing foot ulcers?

- If you have reduced sensation to your feet (see above). The risk of this occurring increases the longer you have diabetes and the older you are. Also, if your diabetes is poorly controlled. This is one of the reasons why it is very important to keep your blood sugar level as near normal as possible.
- If you have narrowed arteries (see above). The risk of this occurring also increases the longer you have diabetes and the older you become. Men are also at greater risk. Other risk factors, such as smoking, doing little physical activity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and being overweight all compound the risk factor of developing ulcers.
- If you have had a foot ulcer in the past.
- If you have other complications of diabetes, such as kidney or eye problems.
- If your feet are more prone to minor cuts, grazes, corns or calluses. These are more likely to occur if:
 - you have foot problems such as bunions which put pressure on points on the feet.
 - your shoes do not fit properly, which will also cause pressure.
 - you have leg problems which affect the way that you walk, or prevent you from bending to care for your feet.

Foot care tips for diabetics

There are a number of healthcare tips that should be adhered to in order to make sure your feet stay as healthy as possible.

1. Examine your feet yourself

It is easy to ignore mild problems with your feet, hoping that they will go away. However, the best course of action is to regularly examine your own feet for the slightest sign of ulcers or problems. This can be particularly important if you are suffering from poor circulation and numbness. Treat any cut, graze, bruise or mark with suspicion: either treat it yourself or consult your doctor as soon as possible. Also be aware of cracking from dry skin becoming ulcerated over time. Take extreme care of your feet, making sure that your socks and footwear are comfortable and fit well. If your eyesight has diminished due to diabetes, make sure that a professional is on hand to examine your feet and cut your toe nails.

2. Have your feet examined by a professional

Making sure that you receive a regular check-up from a health professional is also a good idea. In this way, any problems will be detected at an early stage, and treatment *should* be relatively simple and painless. Part of this

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review should also be to examine your feet to look for problems such as reduced sensation or poor circulation. If any problems are detected then more frequent examinations will usually be recommended.

3. Manage your diabetes

Strictly controlling your diabetes with an detailed treatment regime, healthy diet and lifestyle, and an appropriate amount of exercise means that you are less likely to suffer from foot complications, such as foot ulcers. Reducing any other risk factors will also reduce your risk of diabetic complications. In particular, if you smoke, you are strongly advised to stop.

4. How are diabetic foot ulcers treated?

Diabetic foot ulcers are treated depending upon their severity. The first stage will be to remove any factors that are exerting pressure on sensitive areas of the foot. This could include footwear such as shoes or socks. You should tell your doctor or foot health practitioner straight away if you suspect an ulcer has formed. Treatment aims to dress and protect the ulcer, to prevent or treat any infection and also to help your skin to heal.

Many foot ulcers will heal with simple measures including a course of antibiotics and regular examination. However, they can take a long time to heal. In some cases, the ulcer becomes worse, badly infected and does not heal. Sometimes infection spreads to nearby bones or joints, which can be difficult to clear, even with a long course of antibiotics. Occasionally, the tissue in parts of the foot cannot survive and the only solution then is to amputate the affected part.

This is why it is of the utmost importance to regularly examine your feet and ensure they remain healthy for as long as you do!

Why not use my Do's and Don't's Advice Sheet as a "Quick Flick" Reference!

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