
Care of the Ageing Foot

Some basic guidelines and common sense

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Introduction

About seventy five percent of our population will experience foot health problems of varying degrees at sometime in their lives. As part of our ever-growing ageing population in Ireland, you really need to take the best possible care of your feet. Look after them now. It is never too late and will insure good mobility and comfort as you head further into retirement.

No doubt you might rightly feel that you have enough to worry about with your general health and that you really don't have the time to worry about your feet. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is an established medical fact that a number of severe health conditions manifest themselves initially within the feet. Conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, nerve and circulatory disorders can all show early signs and symptoms in the foot. If you do not look after your feet, their neglect can contribute to further debilitation of your general health.

You might be surprised to realise that in your lifetime you will have walked on average four times the circumference of the Earth. Combine this type of use with an inherited foot problem and it is little wonder some people's feet can be a living hell for them.

It is true to say that your feet are a reflection of your general health and well being. This reflection might very well be the result of the wear and tear of time. However, there are known cases that are the result of someone else's ill intent. A few retired detectives among you might well know of the forensic fact that arsenic poisoning, secretly administered over a prolonged period of time, is detected by observing the finger and toenails of the victim. A telltale horizontal discoloured line appears across their nails.

The following advice is designed to be an outline to help you take better care of your feet.

Hygiene

If you stop to think just how often you might wash your hands over a day then it is important for you to take the time and gently bathe and cleanse your feet often. If you shower once a day and feel that this covers all, then think again! All the dirt and germs covering your body are washed down to your feet. Your feet might well end up more germ burdened following a shower.

It is interesting to note that whenever I perform an operation on a patient's foot, I will have my assistant thoroughly scrub the foot. I have always emphasised as much care and attention has to be paid to this critical part of the surgical procedure even more so than the scrubbing of the surgeon's hands or the actual operation itself. The reason I am this fastidious with my surgical patients is that studies have clearly shown the foot to be one of the most germ-infested parts of the human body. Further studies have also shown a significant reduction in the incidence of post-operative wound infections once a thorough foot scrub is introduced just prior to foot surgery.

Having given this information though, I would not expect you to go to such lengths for your own foot hygiene. A simpler approach such as the following instructions might build a good routine for you and provide overall better foot health.

Foot Bath Routine

Plan around a 20-minute regular routine. The length of the 9 O'clock news, three times a week would be ideal. Stock some clean cotton drying towels to have close to hand. Also get a soft nailbrush and a face cloth and some moisturising cream. Don't forget a fresh pair of socks.

Half fill a basin with warm to hot soapy water. A dash of regular washing up liquid can suffice. Have a hot kettle at hand to top up the temperature as required. Ease your feet in and soak for about 15-minutes. Reach down and gently scrub in a slow circular motion the entire surface of each foot. Be sure to tackle the backs of the ankles as well as the nail edges. Then, with the wet face cloth, carefully run the edge of it between each toe from bottom to top. The skin in between the toes can be sensitive and delicate so be extra careful not to separate the toes too much as this might cause the skin to split.

Once washed dry your feet thoroughly. Moisturising cream can now be applied. A small dollop about the size of your thumbnail is sufficient for one foot. Always apply cream to your feet after a good hygiene routine. Soaking the feet in a footbath in this manner has a multiplying effect on the cream you use. I believe the above example would equate to applying five times this amount if the foot were dry.

I cannot emphasise enough a regular footbath routine such as this. If all my current older patients were to do this then easily 50% of the common foot complaints they have developed would disappear.

Trimming of Toenails

It is always safest to trim your toenails before any moisturising cream is applied. You require some scissors recommended for cutting toenails. These should have short, straight blades. Ask for some through your pharmacy. Healthy toenails need to be cut straight across. Never round them, as you would finger nails. Avoid cutting down the side of the toenail. Poor self-treatment for ingrown toenail can lead to nasty and painful infections.

Footwear

I personally have no problem with patients, on occasion, wearing fashionable shoes. What I cannot understand is the mentality of a patient who wears fashion shoes all the time. Simple research has shown that women suffer three times more often than men with foot problems. This is directly related to prolonged wearing of fashion footwear.

If I had my way, then I would have all my older patients wear "runners". Forget about the look or what age you are. The oldest patient I convinced to wear them was aged 90. For the remaining five years of her life she was never to be seen without them. She certainly found great comfort in them and they contributed to her walking and standing with ease at public functions. She often told me that this was the best advice she was ever given.

Exercise

It is not that you necessarily have to do any fancy exercise routines to keep your feet fit. Wearing a supportive, comfortable shoe and going for a brisk 20–minute walk can not only work wonders for your feet but it is good for your body too. Prolonged sitting can contribute to swelling of the feet and ankles. Besides from being uncomfortable, swelling like this is unhealthy for the muscles, bones and skin of your feet. If walking is not possible then I have my patients wiggle their toes, point their feet up and down and rotate their feet from the ankles both in a clockwise and anticlockwise direction. Performed for five minutes every half hour this will stimulate the natural muscle pump action of the legs and feet. This action will carry these accumulated tissue fluids back up the leg and into the body.

Please note

A number of Health Agencies around the world now recognise the vital importance of foot health in the older population. Foot health goes along with equal importance as for eye and ear health in maintaining the independence of an individual. I once had the opportunity to speak with the head of a government health department for the elderly. He rightly pointed out to me that if he were to insure the population under his care were all given eye glasses to see, so that they did not trip, hearing aids to make sure they could answer the telephone and foot health well maintained to keep them mobile and able to go to the shops, then the government would save millions on hospital bills.

Go on, take a little time and really care for your feet.

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