Caring for your feet

Advice for older people

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Leaflets are free of charge and available from the Information Resources Team at the address on the back page, email adviceleaflets@helpttheaged.org.uk or fax 0870 770 3282.

This leaflet is endorsed by The Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists.

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Looking after your feet is one of the most important aspects of personal health care, whatever your age. During your lifetime, your feet could walk the equivalent of four times around the world! To make sure that your feet stay fit, you need to look after them, keeping them clean, warm and well supported.

In this leaflet, we use the term chiropodist to refer to both a chiropodist and podiatrist.

Trouble with your feet?

Generally our feet serve us well, but they are subjected to a lot of stress and strain. Wearing shoes which don't fit properly, walking on hard pavements or even just standing still can all take their toll on your feet.

Never ignore minor foot troubles. They may not seem to matter very much at the time, but can get worse unless you seek proper attention and treatment.

Symptoms such as persistent pain, soreness or redness are warning signs. If, for example, you neglect a corn, it can develop and become more painful; in extreme cases, the corn may become infected and develop into an ulcer. You may then start to change your walking pattern to avoid the pain which can lead to more serious problems. It may also cause other problems such as a bad back.

Always seek advice about foot problems quickly; this will save you discomfort in the future.

Looking after your feet

Buying new shoes

It is very important when you buy shoes that they fit your feet properly. This can prevent problems developing as well giving you
extra stability; wearing the correct footwear can help prevent falls if you are at all unsteady on your feet. For more information and practical advice on how to stay steady on your feet, see our free advice leaflet *Staying Steady.*

When buying new footwear, it is important to bear in mind the following points.

- It is essential that shoes, boots and slippers fit properly and allow your feet to breathe.

- There should always be a half-inch gap between the ends of your toes and the ends of the shoes. You can find the position of your toes by pressing down on the top of the shoe. They should fit snugly at both the heel and the instep. Shoes which have a fastening such as a strap or laces will help to keep your heel to the back of the shoe and stop your toes getting squashed.

- Make sure the shoes are wide enough. The widest part of your feet should rest in the widest part of the shoe. Check to see whether there is enough room for your toes to wriggle in the shoe.

- As you get older, the size and shape of your feet may change so always have your feet measured when buying new shoes. If possible, stay standing while your feet are measured. When you try on a new pair of shoes, make sure you stand up and walk around in them. Try walking on a hard surface as well as on a carpet so you can check how well the shoes cushion your feet. For details of registered shoe fitters, call The Society of Shoe Fitters on 01953 851171. It can provide information and advice on buying shoes and footcare. Its contact details is in the Useful contacts section, starting on page 15.

- Make sure that you feel safe and secure when you walk, and that the shoes you choose protect and support your feet.
Look for footwear which has soft supple uppers of leather or fabric. Avoid shoes with a lot of decorative stitching which can stop the shoe from stretching over a bunion or raised toe. Feel around inside the shoes to make sure that there are no seams or stitching to rub your feet.

Make sure that you can get the shoes on and off by yourself. A shoe horn with a long handle could help. If you find tying the laces difficult you could try footwear with Velcro fastenings.

Choose slippers with high sides and firm soles which enclose the heel. A strap or flap fastening allows the slipper to be adjusted to fit your foot exactly.

When buying new shoes be sure to take the time you need to decide if they are suitable. Don’t be rushed into buying shoes that you’re not sure about, or ones you haven’t tried on. More expensive shoes are not always better for your feet – choosing a pair of shoes is all about what is most suitable for you.

It is often a good idea to buy shoes in the afternoon, particularly if your feet swell during the day. Shoes that fit well in the morning may become too tight by the evening. You may find it easier to try on shoes in your own home and in your own time. There are many mail order companies which supply a wide range of footwear. Before ordering your shoes, check that you can exchange them or get a refund if they are uncomfortable. For advice on buying goods at home, see our free information sheet, Buying Goods or Services at Home.

Socks, stockings and garters

Make sure that socks and stockings fit you properly and aren't too tight. Don’t wear two pairs of socks in shoes which already fit and avoid tight garters as these can reduce the circulation of
blood to your ankles and feet. Change your socks and stockings every day.

If you have varicose veins, you need to take special care of your legs. Support hosiery, also known as compression stockings, can relieve the symptoms of varicose veins, and may prevent varicose veins from getting worse. Support hosiery come in different strengths and are made tighter at the ankle to encourage blood to flow back up the leg towards the heart. If your doctor feels that you would benefit from support stockings, you may be able to get them on prescription through the NHS. Before you buy support hosiery, make sure you get advice from your doctor or chiropodist as to which grade (size) is most appropriate; this is particularly important if you have diabetes as you may have lost some feeling in your legs, and could be wearing the wrong size stockings.

A few simple tips to help varicose veins and relieve aching legs are given below.

- Keep mobile: avoid sitting or standing still for long periods of time.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Put your feet up when you can.
- Whenever you get the opportunity (at least a few minutes every day) try circling your ankles and curling your toes.
- Do not cross your legs while sitting.
- If you smoke, try to give up.
- Avoid popsocks or hold-ups with tight elastic.

**Simple footcare**

Keeping your feet clean is very important and is the main way of preventing infections. Wash your feet every day in warm water.
Rinse them well and dry them gently with a soft towel, taking particular care to dry between the toes.

If you have hard, dead skin on your feet, use a chiropody sponge or pumice stone. You can get these from chemists’ shops; ask your chemist for advice on which product to use, particularly if you have diabetes. If the hard skin is over a boney area or joint, or it is painful, go to see a chiropodist.

If your skin is dry, apply moisturising cream, over your foot. Massage the cream in upwards, from the toes towards the knees, to stimulate your circulation. But don’t apply cream between your toes.

If your feet get very moist because of heavy perspiration, dab surgical spirit between toes after washing. You could also try an anti-perspirant spray for feet or a special shoe deodorant. Wearing cotton or woollen socks, rather than ones made of synthetic materials, can also help. If the moisture or odour continues, seek advice from your doctor.

Make sure that your feet are completely dry before putting on shoes and socks. Never wear wet shoes – you can dry them out by packing them with newspaper before drying them in gentle heat.

Trim your toenails regularly. Always cut them straight across so that they are level with the ends of your toes and not too short. Don’t try to cut around the corners of the nails as this can encourage ingrowing toenails.

You can buy nail clippers to help you cut your toe nails correctly. Smooth nail edges with an emery board so that stockings or fine socks won’t snag. Never poke anything down under the nail. If you can’t bend down to cut your nails, ask a friend or relative to help you. Failing this, contact a chiropodist. Your doctor’s surgery may also offer this service.
Exercise your feet

Exercise can really help to keep feet healthy – it tones up muscles, helps to strengthen your arches and stimulates blood circulation. Try doing the following exercises regularly. As with any exercise, take it gently at first and build up slowly. If you’re not used to taking physical exercise, speak to your doctor first.

1. Rising on tiptoes

Stand with feet parallel and, holding on to a steady piece of furniture for support, rise slowly up and down on your tiptoes. This exercises the leg muscles and helps strengthen the foot muscles.

2. Point your toes

Sitting down, extend and stretch the foot in as straight a line with the leg as possible.

3. Rotate your feet

Still sitting, extend feet one at a time and rotate slowly at the ankle, as if you are trying to draw the largest circle possible with your big toe. Do this first in one direction, then the other.

4. Wiggle your toes

Remain sitting with feet resting on the floor. Move your toes up and down.