The effects of smoking on your feet and legs

Seeking Help

Contact your GP, practice nurse or podiatrist for advice about stopping smoking and the positive effects it can have upon your feet and legs.

You could also contact the Stop Smoking Service:

Gateshead or South Tyneside
Freephone 0800 531 6317

Sunderland
Freephone 0800 587 4865

NHS South of Tyne and Wear (serving Gateshead Primary Care Trust, South Tyneside Primary Care Trust and Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust) is committed to raising the standard of written information for patients, their carers, people who use the NHS and the general public.

For further copies please contact Health Education Podiatrist Tel: 0191 445 6674

This information can be made available in another format or language on request. Please contact the Communications and PR Team Tel: 0191 529 7118 Email: mopil@sotw.nhs.uk

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Smoking causes the blood vessels to become sticky from the chemicals contained in tobacco smoke. This allows fatty deposits called atheroma to stick to the artery walls making them narrower and less able to transport blood to the leg and foot. This results in a condition known as peripheral arterial disease (PAD). If you have diabetes, then you have an even greater risk of developing these problems.

How cigarettes can affect your skin and wound wealing

How does smoking affect your feet and legs?

You may get a pain in one or both calves when walking. This is caused by reduced blood flow to the muscles and is known as intermittent claudication. You may only be able to walk short distances without stopping. In severe cases rest pain may be experienced. This is a pain felt when sitting or lying down, often in the feet and toes.

A reduction in blood supply due to narrowing arteries may result in the foot and leg becoming cold and changing colour. Your hair, skin and nails on your legs and feet may change. Often there is little or no hair growth, the nails can become brittle and may grow slowly, and the skin can become dry, flaky and fragile.

Foot and leg ulcers can occur. This happens when circulation is severely reduced and can lead to tissue death known as gangrene.

The benefits of stopping smoking on your feet and legs

Circulation can begin to improve within just two weeks of stopping smoking.

More than 80% of people who stop smoking can double the distance that they are able to walk without stopping.

If you have a wound on your foot or leg, giving up smoking will benefit wound healing by increasing the flow of blood to the tissues.