



A guide to healthy feet

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The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates once said: "When our feet hurt, we hurt all over". Considering that the average person walks on average 10,000 steps a day, if our feet hurt every step, as well as standing- let alone running or dancing- can be rather unpleasant. Yet, few of us take time to know our feet and understand their needs.

Leonardo Da Vinci described the human foot as a masterpiece of engineering. Perhaps he was referring to the fact that each foot is comprised of 20 muscles, 26 bones, 33 joints, over 100 ligaments, 250,000 sweat glands and more nerve endings per square centimetre than any other part of the body. Our feet work hard to help us carry out our daily activities and when they hurt they are simply telling us that something is not quite right.

Studies have shown that unshod populations have less foot problems than shod ones. This shows how so many of us wear shoes that are the wrong size, shape or material. If we wear inappropriate footwear whilst young we will feel the pain in later years. Similarly, if we choose ill-fitting shoes in our adult years, we can experience painful lesions, which may be difficult to cure.

Some problems that are more likely to arise with poor-fitting shoes are bunions, hammertoes, corns, callus and ingrown toenails. We should therefore make sure that our shoes are the right size, width and depth. It is also preferable to choose leather shoes, as they let the skin 'breathe' and prevent sweat from accumulating, which can lead to fungal skin and nails.

It is also important to cut the nails to the shape of the toe: avoid cutting vertically down the corners, as this can give rise to ingrown nails. To avoid corns and callus make sure you moisturise your skin according to your needs. Have a pumice stone or emery board handy and rub gently on any hardened

skin. Try to avoid moisturising between the toes, as this can make the area too moist and can harbour fungi.

Surgical spirit is effective in drying out excess moisture (as opposed to talc).

Verrucae arise as a result of infection of the skin by the papilloma virus. Try to avoid walking barefooted, especially around the gym or swimming pool area, as this is where the virus usually lurks (damp and warm). If you do get a verruca, ask advice from your podiatrist /chiropodist.

Foot shape, gait, trauma, previous foot surgery, muscle weakness/tightness, ligamentous laxity, and congenital or acquired health conditions alone or in combination can lead to mechanical problems of the foot. These can manifest as pain/discomfort in the foot and will need the thorough assessment of a podiatrist and perhaps further investigations to diagnose the problem and formulate treatment. The podiatrist can prescribe insoles- also known as orthoses- and stretching/strengthening exercises to improve foot function. They may also refer you to another discipline to reinforce the treatment.

It is important that people with certain medical issues, such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and various neurological conditions, have their feet regularly checked by a podiatrist. Such conditions can cause impaired circulation and sensation, as well as severe foot deformity and usually require regular attention to prevent the development or deterioration of foot lesions.

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