

Keeping your feet healthy, happy and infection-free

By Aaron Warnick

If you're like a lot of people, your day begins when your feet hit the floor. Whether you're heading on a run or just dragging yourself to the coffee maker, it's a good idea to take care of your feet.

Making sure your feet are comfortable, healthy and clean can mean long-term mobility, particularly as you age.

Feet rank relatively low on the list of body parts people think are important to health and well-being, according to the American Podiatric Medical Association. And while paying attention to other parts of your body like your heart, eyes and teeth is important, 80% of people will report problems with their feet at some point. Half of them say it negatively impacts quality of life.

"The most overlooked aspect of taking care of ones' feet is the ease of it," says Lauren Wurster, DPM, a podiatrist and American Podiatric Medical Association spokesperson. "If you eat right, wear appropriate shoes, stretch daily, cut your toenails straight across — and not too short — and occasionally moisturize the heels, tops and bottoms of your feet, you can save yourself a lot of foot pain."



If the shoe fits...

If you get to the end of your day and nothing feels better than kicking off your shoes, you might have a problem. Shoes shouldn't be cages that you free yourself from.

Shoes play a central role in foot health. First and foremost, they protect your feet from stepping on sharp things. Finding the right-sized shoes can avoid a lot of avoidable aches, blisters, calluses and ingrown toenails. A good rule of thumb for whether a shoe fits is finding a pair with a thumbs' width between your big toe and the tip of the shoe.

"While everyone likes to get shoes based on color and design — myself included — there is so much more to a shoe," Wurster says.

It might be tempting to hang onto those comfy new kicks forever, but you would be putting yourself at risk for Achilles tendonitis, ankle sprains, arch pain, heel pain, shin splints, stress fractures or other painful conditions.

A common foot problem many people have is called plantar fasciitis. It's a problem involving the tissue that connects your heel to

your toes. It feels like a pain on the bottom of your foot and heel and is usually worse when you stand up in the morning or when you've been sitting. People with high arches, flat feet or obesity are at higher risk for plantar fasciitis, as are runners and people who stand a lot. Fortunately, one of the main ways to prevent and treat the problem is to wear better shoes, particularly those with arch support.

When choosing a shoe, pick a design that fits the shape of your foot and toes. Look for supportive soles and arches. Make sure the shoe isn't so narrow that the insides rub on any bony parts of your feet. Your shoes should bend a little around the toes, but not the middle.

According to the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine, your common athletic shoe — also known as a sneaker — should be replaced every 350 to 500 miles of use.



"Many of my patients notice a huge difference once they replace their shoes and wish they wouldn't have waited so long," Wurster says.

Under your socks

Keeping your feet clean is a good health habit. However, no matter how much you scrub and pamper your toes, your feet will at some point during the day be in contact with moisture and bacteria, which means you're at risk of infection. Your feet will even likely start to smell, which is normal. But a lot of odor might be a sign of another problem, such as excessive sweating.

If you catch a foot infection early, chances are you can treat it with some over-the-counter medication. But it's best to reduce your risk of developing an infection in the first place. First and foremost, wash your feet with soap and water every day. Keep your toenails trimmed, change your shoes and socks regularly and don't go barefoot outside of your home — especially in high-risk places like locker rooms or gyms.

If the skin on your foot itches or is flaky or irritated, you might have something common like athlete's foot, which is easily treated. You might also have fungus growing on your toenails, making them look white or yellow. Toenails can also become extra thick or flaky and even fall off.

If your foot problems persist, contact your health care provider for help.

>> For more information on foot health, visit www.apma.org

How common? Very common

About 80% of people experience foot problems, according to the American Podiatric Medical Association. On average, most people experience more than two different foot ailments.

- ◆ 33% experience toenail problems
- ◆ 32% experience sweaty feet or foot odor
- ◆ 27% experience heel pain or plantar fasciitis
- ◆ 27% experience pain in the ball of feet
- ◆ 20% experience pain from high heels

So if you are having problems with your feet, know that you are not alone and there are health care professionals who can help you.

