

Give your feet the care they deserve

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Whatever your age, a pair of strong, healthy feet will help keep you active and energetic. But around 40 per cent of people in Australia develop painful foot problems - and if untreated, they can lead to loss of mobility and independence as people get older. Don't wait until something goes wrong with your feet to appreciate how much you need them - here's some advice on foot care from the Australian Podiatry Association, NSW.

Wear the right shoes.

Wearing the right shoes during childhood helps prevent problems later on. Things to remember when choosing children's shoes are: buy shoes with enough room at the toes for comfort - allow about one thumb's width of space between the end of the longest toe and the end of the shoe. But don't buy shoes big enough "to grow into" - shoes that are too big can cause problems. They should be flexible at the ball of the foot and support the heel at the back.

As for adults, wearing high heels for long periods can lead to lower back pain, aching feet and legs, and clawed toes. To avoid them, keep high heels for special occasions or for when you spend most of the time sitting down. For everyday wear (and dancing) choose low heeled shoes that support the foot. It's especially important for older people to wear well-fitting, low heeled shoes that support their feet - it's easy to fall over in loose-fitting shoes or slippers, or if you're wearing thongs. Sometimes older people lose the natural "padding" on the ball of the foot and find walking uncomfortable as a result, but special inserts are available from podiatrists to put in the shoe and cushion the foot.

Coping with common foot problems.

Corns and calluses are lumps of horny skin on feet or toes. They're caused when one part of the foot has to carry too much weight - a result of wearing the wrong shoes or because of a variation in the shape of the foot. If corns and calluses persist, see a podiatrist - otherwise the problem may recur and get worse. The same goes for bunions which are painful swellings on the joint of the big toe. If you have one, or have one developing, ask a podiatrist for advice. Ingrowing toenails happen when the sides of the nail dig into the flesh, causing swelling and pain. Avoid them by cutting the nails straight across, level with the ends of the toes, and not wearing shoes that are too tight.

If you have diabetes.

Foot care is especially important. Because this disease can harm the nerves in the feet, it's possible to have a cut, injury or blister without knowing it. Another problem is that diabetes can also affect circulation and this means that if there is an injury - however small - it will be slower to heal and more likely to become infected. Although this might seem like a minor problem, these injuries can lead to complications - and even amputation of the foot, or lower leg - if they're not promptly treated

This is why it's important to check feet daily for any signs of injury, swelling or pain - if some parts of your feet are difficult to see, use a mirror. Clean any blisters, cuts and scratches with a mild antiseptic and cover with a sterile dressing. See a doctor or if the injury doesn't begin healing in three or four days. Wash feet daily in warm (not hot water). Dry them thoroughly and gently. If the skin becomes dry, use a moisturiser every day to prevent the skin cracking.