



How diabetes affects your feet

People with diabetes are at risk for a number of foot problems, especially if your blood glucose (sugar) levels are not controlled.

How does diabetes affect my feet?

Here are two main ways:

1. **Nerve damage:** Diabetes can damage the nerves in your feet making it harder to feel heat, cold, pain, or pressure. This can make it hard to feel blisters, sores, or other injuries when they occur. Nerve damage can also cause changes in the shape of your feet and toes.
2. **Poor circulation (blood flow):** Diabetes can cause the blood vessels in the legs to harden and narrow decreasing the amount of blood that reaches the feet. Decreased blood flow also limits the number of infection-fighting white blood cells that can get to the feet. This can cause sores or injuries to heal slower. Poor circulation in the legs can also cause pain during physical activity because the muscles are not getting enough oxygen, a condition called intermittent claudication.

Sometimes these two problems work together. Nerve damage can keep you from knowing you have a sore on your foot which can get infected. Poor circulation can then make it harder for the infected sore to heal.

At each diabetes visit with your health care provider:

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- Take off your shoes and socks and ask your health care provider to check your feet for any blisters, foot ulcers, or cracked skin.
 - Ask to have your feet checked for nerve problems.
 - Ask to have your feet checked for blood circulation problems.
 - Ask what lotion or cream is okay to use on your feet.
 - Ask if you need to be seen for toenail care.
 - Ask to have any calluses trimmed, if needed.

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What are some common foot problems to watch for?

The following foot problems can happen to anyone. However, if you have diabetes these problems can cause infection especially if your blood glucose (sugar) levels are high.

- **Calluses:** Too much pressure or rubbing on the foot can cause thick layers of skin to form, called calluses. If not trimmed calluses can break down and cause open sores, increasing the risk of infection. Do not try to cut or remove calluses yourself, this is a job for your health care provider.
- **Blisters:** Wearing shoes that do not fit properly or wearing shoes without socks can cause your shoes to rub on your feet. This rubbing can cause blisters. Blisters can get infected, especially if broken open.
- **Foot ulcers:** A foot ulcer is an open sore on your feet. A foot ulcer may not hurt if you have nerve damage to your feet. Poor circulation and/or high blood sugar levels can make it hard for ulcers to heal and become infected. It is important for your health care provider to check your feet for ulcers.
- **Dry and cracked skin:** Nerve damage caused by diabetes can decrease the amount of sweat your body produces. Because sweat supplies the skin with moisture, a lack of sweat can cause dry skin. Dry skin can then become cracked which may cause an infection.

What can I do to help prevent foot problems?

- Keep your blood sugar levels controlled. Ask your healthcare provider what your target blood sugar levels are. This will help prevent nerve damage, poor circulation, and infection.
- Wash your feet daily. Use your elbow to test that water is not too hot.
- Dry your feet well. Pay special attention to the spaces between your toes.
- Check your feet every day for cuts, sores, blisters, redness, calluses, or other injuries. Use a mirror or ask someone to check your feet for you if you are not able to.
- Use lotion on clean dry feet. Do not put lotion between your toes. Be careful after applying lotion as your feet may slip on the floor.
- Always wear slippers or shoes to protect your feet. Wear well-fitting shoes and always wear socks or stockings to avoid blisters.
- Feel the inside of your shoes with your hand before putting them on to be sure there are no sharp edges or objects that could hurt your feet.
- Tell your health care provider right away about any foot problems.