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# Foot health is for everyone

By Audrey Wall

Our feet take us through our lives – walking, running, climbing. Our feet support and carry us every day. An average human will walk enough steps in their lifetime to circle the globe three times, requiring the 52 bones, 66 joints, 38 muscles, 214 ligaments and assorted fat pads and pores to function as the marvels of engineering they are. We push them into shoes, asking them to bend and flex in ways often unnatural. It can be easy to ignore feet – too hard to reach or see, or we're just too tired to do anything, relying on the bathmat to dry them for us.

For people with lymphedema, changes in skin pH, gait (how you walk), and weight or flexibility can significantly impact a person's foot health. Foot care can be especially problematic – edematous legs and feet make it hard to flex and bend. Even arm and hand edema can make foot care difficult (e.g., holding a file, cutting toenails). In addition, and if a limb is wrapped for decongestion, self-foot care is next to impossible. Those who live with lymphedema also know the difficulty of finding well-fitting footwear. And that's just finding shoes that do the job, let alone look good while doing it.

It is especially important to care for **feet foot** complications as they arise, such as calluses, corns, thickened or ingrowing toenails, or even painful sores to prevent further complications compound with lymphedema. So what's a person with the complications of lymphedema to do to ensure their feet stay healthy?

First, check your skin regularly. If bending and inspecting your feet are a problem, there are several ways to get it done. You could ask a partner or

friend to look for you or take photos of your feet on your phone. You could also use a mirror. Perhaps a standing mirror or one hung on a wall so that from a seated position, you move your feet around and look at them. If possible, lift your leg to see the bottom of your foot. If neither of these ideas works, visit a regulated health care provider such as a foot nurse or chiropodist – someone who knows what they're looking at and can provide good advice.

You should be checking that your skin is intact, with healthy pink nail beds and a smooth shape. Look between and under your toes for cracked skin and feel for blisters, bumps, sores, calluses, splinters or athlete's foot.

Next, get to know your feet when they feel relatively good. What do your toes and toenails look like? How do they feel when you touch them? What's the shape of your foot? Are there any moles or skin issues? Moles that are new or you've never noticed before should be looked at by a health professional, such as a foot care nurse, podiatrist or chiropodist. Even if they're benign, it's good to get a baseline on them. Melanoma doesn't discriminate – skin cancer can show up anywhere, even the soles of feet or between toes. Remember to apply sunscreen to your feet. Daily inspections of your feet will help you keep on top of things. Once you know what your foot looks like on a regular day, anything out of the ordinary will be something you notice right away and can take care of in the moment.

Regular foot care involves washing, drying and moisturizing with products designed for feet. Remember, creams are barriers and should not



Ingrown toenail with infection



Toenail fungus



Athlete's foot



Callus



**Audrey Wall** is a Registered Nurse who practices foot care at her clinic, Equil Wellness Services, in St. Catharines, Ontario. Audrey believes that when your feet feel good, you feel good.

be applied between toes – they create warm, moist environments, which contribute to skin breakdown. Be sure the product you use is compatible with compression garments. Some creams clog knits and can break down the fabric. Your garment provider should be able to direct you to a moisturizer that is appropriate to use with compression wear. Nighttime skin care can also be effective once compression garments are removed.

Toenail trimming is usually done straight across but if the nail beds are very round, follow the contour of the nail bed and then gently file the edges smooth. Use a clipper or manicure scissors designed for feet. If your toenails are thick, use an emery board or file to carefully smooth and shape them as well as possible. I can hear some of you saying, “that’s great but my legs are always wrapped and I can’t get to them”. I understand that this can be quite a process. However, including some skin/foot care time before wrapping can really help. The important point is to do what you can, where you’re at, with what you have. And please don’t be shy about asking for help; if you can’t see or reach, see a foot nurse or chiropodist.

Sometimes there are other co-morbidities such as diabetes or vascular/circulatory complications. These issues can be associated with neuropathy,

which is a loss of sensation in the feet and that can lead to ulcerations and serious infections. BUT not everyone has neuropathy. People with neuropathy, whether a complication of diabetes, cancer treatment or for any other reason, need to be especially protective of their feet. Having neuropathy means that you might have a pebble in your shoe, not feel it, and walk on it all day, which can lead to the formation of an ulcer. For this reason, it’s important to inspect and feel your feet daily, looking for the unexpected. If you can, wear white socks – blood or debris will show up right away.

Shoe choices can have significant impact on our feet. Please try to be sensible. Wear shoes for what you’re doing and what you need at the time. When it comes to choosing shoes, look at the toe box – where your toes live. Where does the shoe start to narrow? Is there room for your toes to move independently? Is the shoe supportive and protective? Does the shoe pinch anywhere?

Please don’t buy shoes that need ‘breaking in’. That’s a recipe for blisters and pain. Poorly fit shoes translate to knee, hip and lower back pain. Sometimes, we need shoes exclusively for function, and need to put form on the back burner. With edematous feet, choose shoes that protect heels and toes, are supportive to provide

balance, and are flexible or adjustable enough to move with changes in foot shape and size. Velcro tabs can be especially helpful. If the shoes feel good and protect your feet, they’re the ones for you. There are footwear suppliers who are working hard to meet the needs of people with shoe challenges

and who I’m sure are working on how to bridge the gap between form and function.

Foot health is more important than most people realize. As a foot nurse I see the results of ignoring foot issues every day. Regular care, inspection and prompt attention to small issues will help prevent bigger problems. Find a foot nurse – we’re here to help. Because we know that when your feet feel good, you feel good. **LP**

## Foot Care Tips

- Inspect feet regularly
- Wash, dry and moisturize daily (or as often as possible)
- File & shape, rather than cut toenails
- Choose well-fitting shoes
- Care for injuries promptly
- Be gentle with your feet



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