

Ageing



Foot health and ageing

As our feet grow older, they naturally develop more problems. But painful and uncomfortable feet are not a natural part of growing old, or something to 'put up with'. A lot can be done to improve comfort, relieve pain and keep you on your feet for life.

Mirrors of health

The condition of our feet often provides early indications of conditions such as diabetes, arthritis and circulatory disease. For this reason, the human foot is sometimes called the 'mirror of health'.

Look out for signs such as dry skin, brittle nails, burning and tingling sensations, feelings of cold, numbness, and discolouration. Always seek the opinion of your podiatrist when any of these signs occur.

Foot problems can be prevented

As we age, our feet tend to spread and lose the fatty pads that cushion the bottom of the feet. If we are carrying extra weight, this can also affect the bone and ligament structure.

Many people, including older people, believe that it is normal for feet to hurt, and simply resign themselves to enduring foot problems which could be treated.

There are more than 300 different foot conditions. Some are inherited, but for older people, most stem from the impact of years of use. However, even among people in their retirement years, many foot problems can be treated successfully, and the pain of foot conditions relieved.

Older people should have their feet measured for shoe sizes more frequently, rather than presuming that their shoe sizes remain constant. Dry skin and brittle nails are other conditions older people commonly face.

Taking good care of your foot health has many benefits including increasing your comfort, limiting the possibility of additional medical problems, reducing your chance of hospitalisation due to infection, and keeping you active and mobile.

Keep them walking

Mobility can be a problem for older people, yet with basic footcare, and the prompt attention of any problems, getting around shouldn't be difficult.

Podiatrists provide services designed to help keep older people on their feet, serving in hospitals, community health centres and nursing homes, as well as in private practice.

Nail care

Keeping nails cut and under control will help keep you mobile. Yet a lot of elderly people find cutting toenails a problem, due to poor eyesight or difficulties in bending down.

If you can cut them yourself, make sure you cut them straight across to a length just below the end of the toe, using a strong pair of nail clippers. After clipping, smooth nails with a file or emery board, using downward strokes. Your podiatrist will be able to cut even heavily overgrown or thick nails painlessly, and advise on appropriate self-care.

Foot health tips

- Properly fitted shoes are essential. The older you get, the more you need a shoe that holds your foot firmly in place and gives adequate support. Sloppy old favourites should be thrown out, as they will make you feel unstable.
- A shoe with a firm sole and soft upper is best for daily activities.
- Walking is the best exercise for your feet.
- Pantyhose or stockings should be of the correct size and preferably free of seams.
- Except at the beach, avoid going barefoot, even in your own home.
- Do not wear tight garters as these can affect your circulation.
- Never cut corns and calluses with a razor, pocket knife, or other such instruments and don't use over-the-counter corn products as they may do more harm than good, unless they have been recommended to you by your podiatrist.
- Bathe your feet daily in lukewarm (not hot) water, using a mild soap, preferably one containing moisturisers, or use a moisturiser separately.
- Trim or file your toenails straight across, or have a podiatrist cut them for you.
- Inspect your feet every day, or have someone do this for you. If you notice any redness, cracks in the skin, or sores, consult your podiatrist.
- Have your feet examined by a podiatrist at least once a year.

How your podiatrist can help

Podiatrists are highly skilled health professionals trained to deal with the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of medical and surgical conditions of the feet and lower limbs. Podiatrists have completed a Bachelor of Podiatry or higher degree, and are continually upgrading their skills and knowledge through further education and training.

Regular visits to your podiatrist can help prevent foot problems, alleviate pain, and help keep you on your feet and mobile.

Health Funds

Many health funds in Australia provide cover for podiatry services on their ancillary tables and government funded services are available through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, some public hospitals and community health centres.

Please note: The information in this document should not be used as a substitute for podiatric or medical attention.