



Put your best foot forward: Skin conditions affecting the feet

Lynn Lambert, BPharm
Amazeza Information Services

The foot could be regarded as the most neglected part of the body, often exposed to trauma, environmental factors and therefore, increasing its susceptibility to infections. There are many skin conditions that affect the feet, and while many of these can be avoided, some can have severe consequences if left unrecognised and untreated. This article focuses on the most common skin conditions that affect the feet.

Athlete's foot

Fungal infection is one of the most common skin conditions affecting the feet. Unlike its name suggests, athlete's foot does not only occur in athletes. The fungus (*Tinea pedis*) that causes the infection, grows in warm, moist conditions where proper ventilation of the feet is lacking. This condition presents as itching, scaling, redness, small blisters and in some cases, odour. The spaces between the toes appear to be more prone to this infection than other areas of the foot. In some cases, the toenail may also be affected. Improper foot hygiene, especially after physical activity, encourages the development of this fungal infection.

Patients should be advised that feet should be washed and dried carefully and thoroughly, especially between the toes. In addition, treatment with an antifungal cream or ointment should be prescribed for application to the affected areas.

Corns and calluses

Corns and calluses are the most common foot lesions. A callus is an area of hard, thickened skin on the foot that forms in response to pressure or friction, usually through shoes that fit poorly. When pressure is concentrated in a small area, a corn, which has a central core, may develop and cause pain. Corns and calluses commonly affect the ball of the foot, under the big toe or at the tips of toes.

The most important advice is that patients should not treat these on their own. Over-the-counter treatments, such as corn plasters only treat the symptoms and not the cause. In addition, these products can cause damage to the healthy surrounding skin if used incorrectly, increasing the likelihood for infection. Furthermore, patients should be advised to never attempt to cut away or scrape a callus, as there is a risk of infection. Patients should ensure that their footwear fits properly and that the skin is moisturised. Padding of the affected area may help relieve the pressure and reduce the pain. Patients with corns or calluses should be referred to a podiatrist for treatment.

Heel fissures

Heel fissures or cracked heels are a common condition. Heel fissures are caused by dry skin around the heel. As the cracks get deeper, the associated pain worsens and the risk of infection increases. Patients can be given the following advice; however, they should be referred to a podiatrist if pain and discomfort are not alleviated:

- Gentle rubbing of the affected area with a pumice stone is advised to reduce the dryness and roughness of the skin.
- Daily application of a good foot moisturiser or heel balm is advised.
- Open back shoes should be avoided as they contribute to dryness of the skin of the heel.

Blisters

Blisters are fluid-filled areas that develop under the skin in response to friction, and can become irritating and painful.

They are most common in runners and walkers. Although most small blisters should be left alone to reabsorb and heal on their own, larger blisters that may pop open, need to be treated. Since there may be a risk of infection associated with the breaking of the blister, patients should rather have it treated by a healthcare professional.

To avoid blisters, patients should ensure that their shoes fit properly. Feet should be kept dry and the use of wet footwear should be avoided.

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Diabetes and the foot

Patients with diabetes have a greater risk of serious foot problems because healing may be delayed as a result of poor blood circulation. In addition, many diabetic patients suffer damage to the nerve endings and suffer loss of sensation of the feet. Patients with diabetes should check their feet daily

for cuts, blisters, bruises or any signs of injury. They should also wear well-fitting shoes that protect their feet from injury.

Summary

- Most common foot problems can be easily avoided and treated.
- Patients should ensure that shoes fit properly and practice thorough foot hygiene.
- Seek advice from a podiatrist regarding the best treatment for a specific condition.
- People with diabetes should check their feet daily and have them assessed by a podiatrist at least once a year.

Bibliography

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