

Diabetes: Foot Ulcers and Infections

What are diabetic foot complications?

Foot ulcers (sores) and infections are problems that can be caused by diabetes. The severity of the problem can range from minor sores to serious damage of tissues in the foot.

How do they occur?

When you have diabetes, you may have poor blood flow to your feet. It is harder for your feet to fight infections and heal from injuries. As a result, any infections and sores on your feet can become serious. Without treatment, severe infections can cause the flesh of your foot to die (gangrene). Diabetics are 20 times more likely to have gangrene in the foot than people who do not have diabetes.

Because diabetes damages nerve endings, you may not feel pain if you hurt your foot or get an infection. This can make it hard for you to know when you need medical treatment.

What are the symptoms?

The initial symptoms of an injury or infection may be swelling, redness, or pain. Sores may appear on the sole of your foot. They may heal but later return in the same place. If the sores are not treated, the flesh may die and turn black.

How are they diagnosed?

We may suspect that you are developing an ulcer if there is an area of redness or a blister forming on your foot. Most often sores are on the bottom of the foot or on the toes. However, they can be anywhere at a place of unusual pressure (such as from a wrinkle in your sock) or an injury (such as from a sharp corner of a toenail).

We may swab the ulcer to test for bacteria.

Sometimes sores are much larger than they appear. We will need to determine how deep the ulcer is. You may need an x-ray to make sure there is no bone infection.

How are they treated?

We may prescribe antibiotics or other medicines to put on the sore or infected part of your foot. The medicine will help fight infection, rid the wound of dead flesh, and help new, healthy flesh to grow. We may also prescribe an oral antibiotic.

You may have to stay off your feet for a while to prevent further irritation of the sores or infections. You may also need to keep your foot raised on a stool or pillow to help the blood circulate better.

You may be hospitalized for treatment. If antibiotics do not heal the infected or ulcerated area, we may have to remove the infected flesh surgically. In an extreme case, if you have gangrene, the affected part of your foot may need to be removed.

How long will the effects last?

As long as you have diabetes, you will be at risk for foot infections.

How can I help prevent diabetic foot complications?

Look at your feet at the end of each day to check for reddened areas, cuts, or scrapes that could become infected. If you cannot see the bottom of your feet, use a mirror or ask someone for help. See us at the first sign of any foot problems. Also follow the foot care guidelines given below.

Bathing and drying

- Wash your feet every day with soap and warm (not hot) water. Then dry your feet carefully, especially between the toes. After your feet are dry, put a lotion recommended by us on your feet to keep the skin soft and free of scales.
- If your feet sweat a lot, keep them dry by dusting them with talcum powder.

Treating corns and calluses

- Don't treat corns or calluses yourself. Do not use over-the-counter products for these problems unless we say it is OK.
- Tell us right away if you develop a corn or callus.

Toenail care

- Cut your toenails carefully. Cut them straight across. Do not cut the sides or the cuticles.
- Clean your nails carefully.
- If your nails are hard to trim, ask us for help.

Foot warmth

- Wear cotton socks to bed if you need extra warmth for your feet.
- Avoid using hot water bottles or electric heaters to warm your feet. Because you may not fully sense hot and cold with your feet, you may burn your feet accidentally and develop an infection.
- Avoid putting your feet where they could accidentally be burned; for example, on hot sand at the beach, in hot bath water, or near a fireplace.

Footwear

- Wear soft leather shoes that fit properly.
- Ask us about specially made shoes, especially if you have foot problems.
- Avoid wearing new shoes for more than an hour a day until they are thoroughly broken in.
- Avoid sitting with your legs crossed.
- Wear clean socks and change them at least once a day.
- Never walk barefoot. Keep slippers by your bed to use when you get up at night.

In addition to these foot care guidelines, good control of your blood sugar and your blood pressure help prevent foot problems.

See us at least every three months. You should have a foot check at each of these visits. Be sure to see us sooner if you have a red area or sore. Once a year we may check your feet for nerve damage. If you lose the ability to feel things on the skin of your feet, then you will need to take extra precautions to prevent injury.