

Poor Circulation (Ischemic Foot)

Information for patients

Ischemic foot is when the blood flow from the heart to the foot is poor. People with ischemic feet typically have cold feet and discoloration in the toes; they may experience cramp-like pain in the muscles of the legs. Over time, numbness, pain and ulcers may develop.

If you have ischemia your feet are vulnerable and you should take special care of them. **Any foot injury, however minor, is potentially serious and you must seek professional help immediately.**

What causes poor circulation to the foot?

This is usually caused by a blockage of the arteries in the leg (atherosclerosis). This can occur slowly, over many years. It can also be caused by injury or damage to the artery.

Some things increase the risk of poor circulation developing. People with diabetes are more likely to develop poor circulation, as are smokers, people with high blood pressure or high cholesterol and people who are not physically active.

If the circulation is poor the blood supply reaching the foot is reduced. This means that there is not enough oxygen and energy reaching the cells to keep them working properly.

Socks and stockings

With some medical conditions the feelings of pain may be dulled and tightly fitting socks and stockings may not feel uncomfortable but will still cramp the toes. This will slow down the circulation and may cause injury as toes rub together.

Try to wear natural materials if possible and avoid manmade fibres (especially nylon). Be aware that some fabrics shrink after washing.

DO NOT wear garters as these may be too tight and restrict the circulation further.

Corns and Callus (hard-skin)

These develop where there is excessive pressure, particularly on dry ischaemic feet. Caring for skin and wearing suitable footwear will help to prevent corns and callous from developing.

A Podiatrist can remove corns or callus but they will return if the excessive pressure is still there or the skin condition is not improved.

Massaging the skin (at least) daily with a moisturising cream, e.g. E45, will help to improve the circulation and skin condition.

DO NOT let anyone other than a Podiatrist cut corns or callus; this can be very dangerous. Never use corn paints or plasters. These contain acids that can burn the skin and cause serious problems.

DO NOT wrap any materials around the toes. Some materials shrink when they get moist and may then restrict the circulation.

Footwear

Suitable shoes offer important protection to feet but ill-fitting shoes can be a major cause of problems. Pressure from poorly fitting shoes can cause many problems e.g. corns, calluses, nail problems and even foot ulcers.

Here are some tips on footwear:

Keep at least one pair of comfortable, well-fitting shoes or boots. Ideally these should be made of soft leather and have a lace fastener. They should have enough room at the toe to allow the toes to be wriggled around whilst standing. They should have a foot shaped, cushioning rubber sole, and a low, wide heel.

- Good shoe shops will measure adult's feet. Feet do change in shape and size over time. Have your feet measured whilst standing up and in the afternoon, as feet swell a little during the day.
- Wear comfortable shoes when you are on your feet a lot - walking, at work, shopping, housework etc. Shoes will support your feet and help to avoid foot strain.
- Do not wear slippers while you are on your feet a lot, they offer little support.
- NEVER – buy shoes which must be 'broken in'.
- Before putting shoes or slippers on feel or look inside them for any shape edges, rough seams or foreign objects.
- Do not buy new shoes for holidays, wear shoes that you know fit well and have not caused any foot problems.

If the skin breaks down or sores and cuts develop on the foot the circulation may not be good enough to heal it.

First Aid treatments

Every break in the skin of the feet may result in a serious problem therefore every effort should be made to prevent injury. Minor cuts or abrasions should be cleansed with water and covered with a non-adhesive sterile dressing e.g. Softpore.

Never place sticky plaster directly onto a wound.

If the cut does not heal, or if it gets worse ask for professional help.

DO NOT burst blisters; if they do burst dress them as minor cuts.

Tell the Podiatrist / Nurse / Doctor if you notice any of these:

- Any colour change in leg or foot;
- Any fluid or discharge from the skin, or nail;
- The foot becomes swollen / painful / uncomfortable or is throbbing;
- Any irritation e.g. severe itching or burning;
- The foot smells strange/ different;
- You develop a fever, 'flu-like symptoms' or your diabetes control becomes poor.

What can I do to help myself?

- If you are a smoker it would be best if you could STOP. Smoking reduces the oxygen levels in the blood which adds to the problems of poor circulation. Ask your health professional for contact details of the local Stop Smoking service.
- If you have diabetes try to manage this and keep blood glucose levels down.
- When sitting, avoid crossing your legs as this can restrict your circulation. Keep legs and feet warm by sitting with your feet up and covering them with a blanket whilst resting .
- Try to keep legs and feet warm by wearing layers of clothing.
- Avoid trauma to the feet, wear shoes or slippers – never walk with bare feet.
- Massage moisturising cream into legs and feet after washing to improve skin condition and boost the circulation.
- Try to take some exercise every day.
- Eat a healthy balanced diet.

Remember to take care of your feet; examine them daily and ask for help when a problem develops. This may help to prevent major problems!

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