

# Thinking on Your Feet

Did you know that every system in your body from circulation to the nervous system can have an effect on the health of your feet? To complicate matters, arthritis, diabetes and other medical conditions can all lead to foot problems. A podiatrist, which is the name for the physician and surgeon dedicated to treating all types of foot disorders, addresses the health of the feet in relation to the condition of the whole body.

Huntington Hospital has 13 podiatrists on staff. According to the hospital's Acting Chief of Podiatric Surgery, **William Weissinger, DPM, DABPS**, they are team players, who are accustomed to working with other doctors to provide integrated care to patients. For instance, Dr. Weissinger will ask one of his diabetic patients, "How's your sugar doing? Are you seeing your internist regularly?"

Nearly everyone will be faced with a foot-related ailment at some point in life. Dr. Weissinger comments, "There is no discrimination based on age, sex, or race." Babies can be born with congenital deformities of the feet. Athletes are susceptible to sports injuries involving their feet. Elderly people often develop corns, callouses, and thickened toenails. Geriatric patients with diabetes, poor vision, circulatory problems, obesity or arthritis should periodically see a podiatrist for routine foot care.

Warts, corns, callouses, ingrown toenails, fungal nails, hammer toes and bunion deformities are common among all people. These ailments can be treated with oral medication or corrective devices such as foot orthotics. If such means are not effective, another possibility is surgical correction utilizing the Ambulatory Surgical Unit at Huntington Hospital.

## Diabetic Foot Care

Diabetics are especially prone to foot problems given their likelihood of neuropathy (diminished sensation) and poor circulation, as well as a decreased ability to fight infection. According to the American Diabetes Association, "Foot problems are one of the leading causes of hospitalization for the 16 million people with diabetes in the United States. It has been estimated that 15% of all people with diabetes will develop a serious foot problem that can potentially threaten their limb or even their life." Dr. Weissinger has witnessed firsthand the epidemic proportions of diabetes. About half his clinical practice is comprised of patients with diabetes.

The podiatrist's role in treating a person with diabetes is one of examination, regulation, education, and coordination with other specialists as a team approach to maintain overall foot health. As early as the 1930's, a prominent New England diabetic clinic found that the amputation rate for diabetics was reduced by fifty percent with the inception of a podiatry service.

Recognition of subtle changes in the feet by the diabetic patient can prevent a large number of advanced foot complications. Simple daily inspection (using a mirror if necessary) and washing of the feet, with particular attention to the spaces in between the toes, can reveal changes in skin texture, sores, cracks, etc. Diabetics should not use heating pads, ice packs or over-the-counter cures and ingrown toenail preparations on their feet. These can reek havoc with the local circulation and lead to the breakdown of the skin, ulcers and infection.

Properly fitting shoes also play a large role in preventing diabetic foot complications. Selecting sensible shoes that fit the contour of the feet

prevents cramping parts sensitive to pressure. There is good news for seniors with diabetes. Medicare now covers therapeutic shoes for diabetics.

Diabetics who encounter an acute foot problem also involving a temperature and flu-like symptoms should seek emergency medical attention. The foot problem may be occurring simultaneously with other underlying medical conditions and needs to be treated immediately. Delays in treatment can lead to greater tissue damage and increase the likelihood of toe or partial/entire foot amputations.

Though diabetics need to pay particular attention to their feet on a regular basis, foot health is really an issue for everyone. Healthy feet that are well-maintained should last a lifetime.

## FOOT TIPS

Wash and inspect your feet daily. Excessive wetness between the toes can promote fungus infection (athlete's foot).

If you notice a deformity developing, see a podiatrist.

Avoid walking barefoot.

Nail care is imperative. Cut toenails short and often. Ingrown toenails can be removed by a podiatrist.

Do not perform bathroom surgery like self-removal of corns or bunions. These are procedures that should be performed by a physician.