

General foot health advice for people with a rheumatic condition

Summary:

Most of the time we do not pay attention to our feet. However, arthritis can cause changes to the health of our feet. It is important to know how to keep our feet in the best possible health and identify any potential problems early. Early identification and treatment of problems can result in better long-term foot health.

This guide is designed to give you simple and safe self-care advice about how to look after your feet if you have a rheumatic condition. It is advised that you contact a Podiatrist to find out more about other treatments that may be available.

Why do I need to check my feet daily?

Arthritis or the medications used to treat it can cause changes in the health of your feet. These changes can sometimes occur quickly. It is important that any potential problems are identified and treated as soon as possible to help keep you well and do not feel increased pain when you walk. If you identify a problem that you are not sure about you can get help by visiting a Podiatrist.

What should I be checking?

You should check the following things:

- *Do you have any areas that are painful, red, hot, or swollen?
- *Do you have any wounds or blisters?
- *Do you have any areas of skin that are a different colour and appear to be changing in size or shape?
- *Is your foot changing shape?
- *Is your skin dry or cracked?
- *Are your nails thick, crumbly, or causing you pain?
- Are your socks too tight and leaving marks on your foot or ankle when you take them off?
- Are there marks on your foot from where your shoe may have rubbed the skin?
- Is your shoe the correct size?

*If you notice any of these things it is recommended that you get advice from a Podiatrist or your GP straight away.

How can I keep my nails in good condition?

Cut or file your toenails regularly unless you have been told not to by a health professional. When cutting your toenails, cut the nail straight across following the natural shape of the nail. Do not cut your toenails too short or cut down the sides of your nails. Cutting down the sides of the nail can mean that spikes of nail are left that can grow into the soft skin around the nail causing pain and sometimes infection (if left an in-growing toenail may develop). Use a nail file to make sure that there are no sharp edges left once you have cut your nails. A long-handled file can help you to reach your toenails more easily. Do not 'pick at' your nails with your fingers.

If your nails are thick you can use a nail file on the top of the nail to thin them down. Your toenails should be smooth. If your toenails are thick, are not smooth or are changing colour you should get advice from a Podiatrist.

Thick or crumbling nails that have yellow/ white/ brown patches can be due to fungal infection but there are a lot of possible causes. It is possible to buy a treatment for fungal nail infection from your Pharmacist but it is advised that you contact a Podiatrist for advice and to confirm a diagnosis before buying and using treatments that are not prescribed. Your toenails should never be painful. If you are experiencing pain around your toenails, or having difficulty cutting your nails, you should get advice from a Podiatrist. You can also ask for advice from a Podiatrist if your toenails are thick, are not smooth or are changing colour.

How can I keep my skin healthy?

It is important to wash your feet daily in warm water with a mild soap. Rinse your feet well and dry them carefully, especially between the toes. Your skin can be slightly thinner and more fragile due to arthritis or some of the medicines used to treat it, so gentle care is needed.

People with arthritis can notice the skin on their feet being dry. Using a moisturiser every day can help improve the health of your skin if it is dry. For areas of hard skin, you can use a cream that has urea in it.

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If you are considering this it is recommended that you discuss this with a Pharmacist before buying any cream. Do not apply cream between your toes. If you do get cream between your toes rub it in fully.

Hard skin can also be reduced by filing it a little and often. Do not attempt to cut or remove the skin with a sharp blade. If you notice that you have a very deep cracks in your skin, or have a wound or blister, you should get urgent advice from a Podiatrist (please see our advice about what to do if you have a foot wound).

If you notice that the area around your foot wound is red, hot, or swollen it is important to get urgent advice because you may have an infection. Infection in the foot is very serious and can be life-threatening if not treated quickly. If you are unsure and in the UK you can get urgent advice by telephoning 111.

What if I notice painful, red, hot, or swollen areas?

Foot pain is not normal. In most cases redness, heat and swelling are because of inflammation. This process happens inside your body and is controlled by your immune system. For people with some types of arthritis this process can become disrupted causing these symptoms to occur. The presence of infection can also trigger similar symptoms to occur.

Because there are different causes for the symptoms of redness, heat or swelling, it is important to get advice straight away so that the cause can be identified. In all cases you are likely to need treatment.

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If you experience pain following a bout of activity, ensure you rest. Continue with your prescribed medication as instructed to manage the pain – do not take more pain killers than the prescribed dose on the packet. Try not to increase your levels of activity too much in a short period of

time and take rests after walking or periods of standing if necessary.

What if my socks are too tight or my shoes are rubbing?

If your socks are too tight you might want to consider the following:

- Changing the style of the sock to one that does not need to be pulled up the leg.
- Buy extra wide socks that do not have tight elastic at the top; you can buy these in some pharmacies or through online retailers.
- Discussing any excess swelling in your ankles that you notice with a Podiatrist or your GP.

If your shoes are rubbing, you might want to consider:

- Checking the inside of the shoe for loose fixings or prominent seams.
- Increasing your shoe size or checking that it fits correctly; our feet can change shape and size as we age or because of arthritis, so it may be useful to check your shoe size with trained shop assistants or by printing an online sizing guide.
- Changing the style of your shoe so that it is wide enough and deep enough for your foot.
- Choose the correct style of shoe for the activity that you are doing (for example you might choose a trainer for sports).
- Using the correct shoe is very important if you have a rheumatic condition. If you are having any difficulty with finding a shoe that fits well and that you can easily get on and off, you should get advice from a Podiatrist.

Key facts:

- Arthritis can impact the health of your feet.
- It is important to check your feet daily and keep them healthy.
- If you notice redness, heat or swelling you should get urgent advice from a Podiatrist, your GP or by calling 111 if you are in the UK.