

Contact Details: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

Podiatry Headquarters: Tel: 01296 566459  
(Buckinghamshire)

The Diabetes Centre: Tel: 01296 315530  
(Stoke Mandeville Hospital)

Spinal Outpatient Services: Tel: 01296 315829

### How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

Infection control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. We ask that you, and anyone visiting you, use the hand sanitiser available at the entrance to every ward before coming in to or after leaving the ward. In some situations hands may need to be washed at the sink using soap and water rather than using the hand sanitiser. Staff will let you know if this is the case.

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## How to look after your feet

A Guide for Spinal Cord Injured Patients

### Patient information leaflet

If you require a translation or an alternative format of this leaflet please call 01296 315829

Safe & compassionate care,

every time

## Why is it important to take a few minutes a day to examine your feet?

Spinal cord injury can result in the loss of mobility and sensation. Any irritation or injury to your foot eg a tight shoe, may cause blisters which can lead to serious complications like an ulcer. An ulcer which develops from such a blister will gradually deteriorate. It will become larger, deeper and more inflamed.

Due to spinal cord injury (SCI) the blood supply to the feet and legs may become sluggish resulting in cold and swollen feet. Any injuries to the feet may be slow to heal and can quickly become infected.

## How to examine your feet

- 1) Look at your feet in the morning and in the evening. Take time to get to know your feet!
- 2) Using a mirror will help you check for cuts, scratches, swellings and inflammation. Feeling your feet will also find lumps eg calluses. Hot spots could be an indication of infection and cold spots due to poor circulation.
- 3) If you are unable to do this for yourself, ask your carer to do this for you. If you note any of the above symptoms, please contact your GP, Podiatrist, Chiropodist or Spinal Outpatient Services.

## Choosing shoes

After a spinal cord injury we recommend that you buy shoes 1-2 sizes bigger than pre-injury, as your feet tend to swell throughout the day. Also your feet will become darker in colour due to poor blood circulation.

Check tops of socks are not constricting.

Please check inside the shoes before putting them on for wrinkled linings, tacks or foreign objects. When purchasing a new pair of shoes they should only be worn for 10-20 minutes twice a day to break them in. On removal you need to check skin for any red marks, which would indicate possible harmful pressure occurring.

## Autonomic Dysreflexia

If you are at risk of Autonomic Dysreflexia you should be aware that conditions such as an ingrown toenail may initiate a dysreflexia attack.

You will be susceptible to autonomic dysreflexia if your injury is at T6 or above.

If you would like more information, please ask for the separate information leaflet on Autonomic Dysreflexia.

## What happens if you don't treat "Athletes Foot"?

It can spread to your toenails causing a nail infection (as overleaf).

Small breaks in the skin can allow other infections entry to the foot and leg resulting in more serious infections, eg cellulitis. The signs and symptoms of cellulitis are inflammation, redness and heat around the site. The surrounding skin may become shiny and you may feel unwell with a high temperature.

## Cleanliness

As our feet are covered up all day, it is easy for feet to get hot and sweaty. It is important to wash your feet daily with lukewarm water and a mild soap. Due to sensory loss you will be unable to feel pain, heat and cold. It is important that you check the water temperature with your elbow. If you are unable to do this, then ask your carer to check the temperature of the water before you wash your feet. Your feet should be dried thoroughly especially between your toes. Using a moisturising cream will keep your skin soft and supple. Do not apply this cream between your toes as it may make the skin moist. Changing socks and tights on a daily basis is also important.

## Cutting Nails

Toenails grow at a rate of approximately 1 cm every 6 months. They should be cut straight across and not down either side of the nail. If nails become misshapen or thickened, you need to see a podiatrist/chiroprapist.

## Fungal nail infection – signs and symptoms:

The infection usually starts at the side of the toenail then:

- it slowly may spread backwards towards the base of the nail and the nail may change colour
- the nail thickens and crumbles
- the tip of the nail can raise, split and separate from the nail bed
- finally the nail may crumble away completely

## What can I do?

Fungal infections will not resolve without treatment. Over the counter treatments have little effect. Talk to your GP who will be able to prescribe an effective treatment. They will take nail clippings to make sure it is a fungus that is causing the problem. Once the fungal nail infection has been identified, you may be prescribed a course of tablets or capsules that are taken by mouth or a treatment that needs applying directly to the affected nails. It is important to treat the infection as it can spread to other parts of the body and to other people.

## How to look after your nails after a fungal infection

- After a fungal infection it may be difficult to look after your toenails due to them becoming thick and crumbly.
- Use nail clippers to trim the nail back and always clean nail clippers after use and thoroughly wash and dry your hands.
- Do not file the end of the nail as it is likely to spread infection.

## Can it come back?

Yes, sometimes, if it has not been completely treated in the first place. If this does occur, you need to revisit your GP.

## What else could it be?

Other conditions that have similar signs and symptoms are:

- psoriasis which can affect the nails as well as the skin.
- an ingrown toenail which can cause the sides of the nail to curl and dig into the skin.
- a minor trauma to the nail, which can cause not only discolouration but separation of the nail from the bed.

## “Athlete’s Foot”

Despite the name, anyone can have this condition! Athlete’s foot is also a fungal infection which thrives on moist warm areas of skin such as between the toes. This is one of the common fungal infections to catch.

Points to remember:

- You will recognise athlete’s foot by irritating patches of skin between the toes, which will itch if you have sensation.
- These patches often occur between the little toe and the one next to it and can spread to the other parts of the foot and body. These patches will be visible even if you don’t have sensation.
- The fungus is transferred whenever you go barefoot in the bathroom at home, communal showers and changing areas.

## Treatment

The infection must be treated in order to get better. Over the counter treatments from your pharmacist are available. Also to help clear the condition, you should:

- Wash your feet at least twice a day and dry thoroughly.
- Use tissue paper to dry between toes rather than a towel as this will lessen the risk of passing on infection.
- You can also contact your podiatrist/chiroprapist for advice.