Silver Stepper

FOOTCARE, BALANCE, FALLS PREVENTION & FOOTWEAR ADVICE

You may look down at your feet one day and wonder 'when the hell did that happen?!'

Key Foot Changes As You Age

- *Your feet can get bigger*, sometimes increasing by an entire shoe size (it's important to check this), as the feet flatten out (the 'arches drop') or they become swollen through poor circulation, weight changes and/or health conditions such as osteoporosis.

- *Skin becomes drier* as sweat and sebaceous (oil) gland production reduces, increasing the skin's pH which weakens the skin's natural barrier function. This makes you more prone to cracks in the skin and fungal infections.

- *Toenails become thicker*. Causes include historical footwear choices (such as shallow, narrow stilettos or loafers, ill-fitting trainers or walking boots, steel toe-capped boots), activity (all sports, basically!), fungal infections, poor circulation, and genetics. Lots of foot quirks are inherited – including a predisposition to fungal infections (more on this later in the series…)

- *Toes can curl or bend*. This is mostly genetic, but footwear plays a key role. Unsupportive shoes (i.e. slip-ons) encourage your toes to curl to 'grip' onto the shoe. The little muscles in the feet become weak through overuse. Over time, your toes will stay in the curled position – but all is not lost! Strength and flexibility exercises, and gentle mobilisation can help.

- *The fatty padding on the bottom of the feet wears away*, giving the sensation of 'walking on pebbles'. This can't be replaced, so cushioned footwear (whether shoes or socks) is key for comfort.

- *Toes can become more swollen*, so there is less of or no gap between them - *or become more bony*, with joints that can rub against one another.

It's all sounding a bit doom and gloom, I know, but there are some simple steps you can take to help.

Everyday Foot Health

Get your feet measured. If you're wearing shoes that are too small - or too big - for you, this will affect your balance. Ill-fitting shoes also cause rubs which can lead to corns and/or sores on your feet and will also contribute to thickening of the toenails through a process called 'repetitive microtrauma'.

Wear good shoes. A good shoe is one that is a) the right size for your feet, b) has a wide deep toebox so there is room to move your toes, c) has a fastening such as Velcro, a zip or laces so that your foot is stabilised in the shoe, and d) has a thick supportive sole.

Moisturise your feet every day. It doesn't really matter what product you use; just apply it often. A small blob rubbed into the soles of the feet nightly will pay dividends over time. If you struggle to bend, squirt the blob on top of the opposing foot and rub the bottom of the other foot into the blob. Ensure you are sat down!

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An alternative would be to use a spray; such as Emollin, Vaseline or Restorate. And don't use too much! If your feet feel sticky after application, you've put too much on.

If you have thick toenails, moisturise them too! This will make them easier to cut and will prevent brittle nails from breaking off. The cream should be allowed to soak into the toenails for 10 minutes before applying socks and shoes.

Dry skin that doesn't improve with moisturiser? It might be a fungal skin infection. Up to a third of the population are walking about with one, and it's easy to miss as there can be no other symptoms.

Walk barefoot when you can if you feel safe to do so, even for just 10 minutes a day. This activates the nerve endings in your feet to remind your brain where your feet are and helps to maintain the strength and flexibility of the tiny muscles in the feet. If you cannot walk barefoot, use a coir mat and rub your feet on the mat for 2 - 5 minutes per day. Maintaining the connection between your brain and your feet is critical as we age to help prevent falls.

If you get swollen feet or legs, **sit with your feet elevated whenever you can**. This helps to pump the fluid back up the legs – otherwise you're fighting against gravity. It's worth speaking to your GP or practice nurse (or podiatrist!) to determine the cause of the swelling, particularly if it's a new symptom.

Take Home Message

Your feet are changing, but all is not lost! Spending just a couple of minutes a day on them could help to prevent problems later. You only get one set, they're worth looking after!

Keep an eye on the Helen Hamlyn Hub website for more helpful hints and tips on keeping your feet healthy and stay tuned for the next instalment in the Silver Stepper series - common conditions affecting the feet and how to treat them at home.



Thanks for reading!
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