

Chapter 4.

Staying on Your Feet

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Build a Stronger Foundation

Making wise choices about foot care, footwear, walkers, and canes makes a big difference in your ability to stay active and independent and avoid falls. When you protect your balance and walking ability, you build a stronger foundation for your healthy life.

Keep Your Feet Healthy

Many people falsely believe that leg and foot pain is a normal part of aging and live with problems that could be treated. **If you have any foot or leg pain, discuss it with a doctor!**

Your feet are a mirror of your health: arthritis, diabetes, and circulation problems can cause changes in your feet that are often the first sign of these health problems. Untreated foot problems affect posture and walking ability, which affect balance and can cause falls.

- Always see a doctor if you notice these changes in your feet: increased skin dryness, brittle nails, discoloration, or feelings of burning, tingling, cold, or numbness.
- Arthritis can easily develop as the joints in your legs and feet wear out with age. Over half of all adults have arthritis in the hips, knees, or feet.

- Corns, calluses, bunions, ulcers, blisters, warts, weak arches, infections, flat feet, pain, cramping, arthritis problems, nail problems, ingrown toenails, and many other foot conditions can usually be successfully treated and managed with professional care.
- Regular foot care is especially important for diabetics and anyone with a circulation problem, as it can help prevent serious infections that can lead to toe or foot amputation. If you have diabetes, it is very important to work with your doctor to keep your blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol close to normal to help prevent diabetes-related foot problems, as well as eye and kidney disease.

Not all serious foot problems cause pain, so it is important to check your feet regularly for cuts, sores, red spots, swelling, and infected toenails (use a mirror, if needed). Make sure to see your doctor right away if a foot cut, sore, blister, or bruise does not begin to heal after two or three days so that it can be treated promptly to prevent infection.

There are over 300 types of foot problems. Any foot problem should be evaluated and treated by your physician or a podiatrist (foot specialist).

Choosing the Best Footwear

Foot protection, comfort, function, and hygiene should be your priorities in choosing shoes. Poor-fitting shoes cause many foot problems.

Choose safe slippers. Smooth-soled slippers, socks, slip-ons, and bare feet are unsafe and can cause falls. When you buy slippers, look for the word “non-slip” on the package, an enclosed heel (no slip-ons), a tread on the bottom, and a snug fit.

When you buy shoes, try to shop in the afternoon, since feet tend to swell during the day. Your shoe size changes with age, so have both feet measured while standing. Get a proper fit for your largest foot and try on both shoes.

The best shoes should feel snug but not tight, with enough room to wiggle your toes and feel comfortable, sturdy, fully supported, and noticeably cushioned. Use the “pinch test” to choose sport or exercise shoes—if you can pinch the shoe over your last two toes, there’s enough space between your foot and the side of the shoe. Remember, there’s no such thing as “breaking in” shoes.

When you shop for shoes and slippers, look for:

- **Strong arch support**—you should be able to put your hand in the shoe and feel an arch.
- **Plenty of toe room**—the outside of the shoe should be as wide as the widest part of your feet.
- **Enough cushioning** to absorb shock, provide some “give,” and make your feet feel very comfortable.
- **Tread patterns** should be slip-resistant and durable, so that they don’t wear out too quickly. The heel and sole should “grip” to reduce risk of falls from slipping.
- The shoe should **completely enclose your foot** (no open heels or slip-ons).
- **Rubber-soled, low-heeled shoes** are best. Avoid leather soles, because they are slippery.
- **A flat or low-heeled walking base with a broad surface** that contacts the floor.
- **The fit should feel like a firm handshake**—not too tight and not too loose. Lace-up or Velcro-strap shoes should be secured tightly and snugly, or your foot will turn in the shoe and throw you off balance.
- **Ventilation and material that lets the feet “breathe”** to help prevent fungus or other infections.
- **Protection from indoor or outdoor walking surface hazards** that could cause you to trip. Bare feet, socks, sandals, and flip-flops can expose feet to injury-causing hazards.
- **The upper part of your shoe should be made of a soft flexible material** that allows the shoe to bend and conform to the shape of your foot.

If you have a foot condition, ask your podiatrist to suggest other special shoe features you might need. Orthotics can help improve posture, balance, weight distribution, gait, and foot, ankle, knee, hip, and back support.

Did You Know?

- **Foot problems take longer to heal because the feet are farthest from the heart and have less blood supply than other areas of the body.**
- **Elevating the feet above the level of the heart daily is very important in promoting healing after injury, surgery, or infection and reducing any foot and ankle swelling.**
- **Our feet change with age. We lose the fat padding that protects the toes, the ball of the foot, and the heels. Our skin becomes thinner and drier, and our feet grow bigger by spreading and flattening.**

Assistive Devices Can Help

“Assistive device” is the health care term for canes, walkers, and other devices designed to help people be independent when health problems interfere with their daily activities. Many adults who would benefit from an assistive device avoid using them due to appearance, denial, embarrassment, cost, lack of information, or because it makes them feel like they’ve lost independence.

Health care professionals view assistive devices as vital tools for helping people with health problems stay safe, active, and independent. Walkers and canes can reduce pain, improve balance and support, and increase the user’s sense of security and physical safety. Hip protectors absorb the impact of a fall and reduce the risk of fracture by shunting