Stepping Up

Foot Care in Later Life

Participant Materials

Participant materials include the following handouts:

- What’s Your Foot Care I.Q.?
- What’s Your Foot Care I.Q? — Answers
- Steps to Prevent Foot Problems
- If the Shoe Fits...Match Game
- If the Shoe Fits...Match Game — Answers
- Walking: Foot Care Tips in Later Life
- Protecting Feet from Common Foot Problems
- Foot Care Resources
- Program Evaluation

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This lesson is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Only your doctor can diagnose and treat a medical problem.

The Oregon Association for Family and Community Education (FCE) is a nonprofit adult education organization. Members of FCE study groups meet informally on a regular basis to learn new skills and information. Oregon FCE cooperates with OSU Extension Service to produce education programs taught by trained volunteers. If you are interested in forming or joining a study group, contact your county Extension office for more information. Everyone is welcome.
Instructions  Circle the correct answer (“true” or “false”) next to each statement.

1. Shop for shoes in the morning to get the best fit.  True    False

2. Daily hygiene is essential to prevent foot problems from excessive perspiration.  True    False

3. Our feet can “mirror” our general health.  True    False

4. About one-quarter of all bones in the body are in the feet.  True    False

5. Seventy-five percent of all Americans will experience painful foot problems at some time during their lives.  True    False

6. With age, adults do not become more prone to stress fractures.  True    False

7. Sending for shoes from a mail-order catalog is a good idea.  True    False

8. If you have a foot or ankle injury, soak it in hot water immediately.  True    False

9. There is no difference between the number of men and the number of women who experience foot problems.  True    False

10. In general, people’s feet do not change size as they age.  True    False
What’s Your Foot Care I.Q? — Answers

1. FALSE
   The American Podiatric Medical Association recommends shopping for shoes in the late afternoon when feet tend to swell.

2. TRUE
   Daily foot hygiene is essential to prevent foot problems due to excessive perspiration. There are approximately 250,000 sweat glands in each pair of feet, and they produce as much as half a pint (1 cup) of moisture daily.

3. TRUE
   Often foot problems may be the first sign of more serious medical conditions, such as arthritis, diabetes, or cancer or kidney, heart, circulatory, or neurological disease.

4. TRUE
   Human feet contain about 52 bones—25 percent of the bones in the body—as well as numerous joints, ligaments, muscles, and tendons.

5. TRUE
   According to the American Podiatric Medical Association, 75 percent of all Americans will experience foot problems of varying degrees at some time in their lives.

6. FALSE
   Older adults have more trouble with their feet because the natural shock absorbers, or fat pads, on the bottoms of the feet tend to deteriorate with age. Bone density does also. These factors combine to make older individuals more prone to stress fractures.

7. FALSE
   Buying shoes from a mail-order catalog is not recommended because each manufacturer’s shoe sizing varies slightly. It is best to always try on both shoes when standing to see if they fit.

8. FALSE
   Don’t use hot water or heat if you think that you have a sprain, fracture, or dislocation. Heat promotes blood flow, causing greater swelling. More swelling means greater pressure on the nerves, which causes more pain. Applying an ice bag wrapped in a towel to the injured area prevents swelling and pain.

9. FALSE
   Women have about four times as many foot problems as men. A study by the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society found that 9 out of 10 women are wearing shoes that are too small for their feet.

10. FALSE
    A person’s shoe size may change throughout his or her adult life. Generally, feet become larger as a person ages. While the foot completes most of its growth by age 18 or 20, its size might increase if the arch collapses in later life, which results in a wider, longer foot.
Steps to Prevent Foot Problems

Getting in step for proper foot health and comfort is essential for older adults if they are to avoid common foot problems and maintain their balance, mobility, and safety. Steps to care for and protect the health of feet include:

**Foot Hygiene**

- **Check feet daily.** Look between the toes and on the bottoms for dry skin, cracks between toes, blisters, sores, and any change in color.

- **Inspect your feet daily under good lighting.** If your eyesight is poor and you cannot see your feet clearly, use a mirror or ask a family member or friend to examine your feet.

- **Wash your feet daily using mild soap and lukewarm (not hot) water.** Gentle massage can help increase circulation to the feet. Poorly cleaned feet can lead to infection, especially if you have diabetes. Don’t soak your feet for long periods.

- **Dry your feet thoroughly.** Gently pat-dry feet with a soft towel, especially between the toes. Moisture between toes fosters germs that could cause an infection. Use an absorbent foot powder. Ask someone to help you if you cannot reach your feet.

- **Use a moisturizing lotion on your feet.** Do not put lotion between your toes. Avoid bath oils. They may feel good, but they can be slippery and cause falls.
Seek Medical Care

Often, all that’s required to get feet back in shape is proper self-care for minor foot ailments and, when necessary, early physician’s care.

See your doctor regularly to keep your feet healthy. Ask your doctor to examine your feet for any signs of redness, swelling, cracked skin, bruising, infection, or blisters. A podiatrist—doctor of podiatric medicine (DPM)—and other primary care doctors (internists and family practitioners) can provide comprehensive and appropriate care. Sometimes, the special skills of an orthopedic surgeon or dermatologist are needed.

If diabetic, use extra precaution. Problems for people who have diabetes most often develop when blood flow is poor or when there is nerve damage. Diabetes can reduce sensation in feet, making it difficult to detect pain, touch, and temperature. If diabetic, follow your physician’s treatment plan. Report any signs of skin discoloration, infection, injury, and blisters in legs or feet to your physician.

Surgery usually is recommended only when most other treatments fail. Surgery may be in the doctor’s or podiatrist’s office or in a hospital or surgery center, usually as an outpatient procedure.

Proper Footwear Can Reduce Foot Problems

The older you get, the more you need a shoe that holds your foot firmly in place to give adequate support. Properly fitted shoes protect your feet and prevent discomfort, injury, and even disabling foot disorders.

Wear shoes that fit. A shoe’s fit is as individual as each person’s foot. Don’t select shoes based on the marked size alone, since all manufacturers create their own models and styles. Consequently, there are no uniformly standard shoe sizes.
Shoe Construction: What Should You Look For?

A shoe has many different parts. Understanding the basics of shoe construction can help ensure that you get the proper fit for function (a specific activity), comfort, and safety.

If the Shoe Fits ... Match Game

Instructions:
Correctly match the name and description of each shoe component listed below with the numbers [1-6] of the shoe diagram.

_____ Collar
Stiffens the back of the shoe for stability; may be padded for comfort. It is intended to cushion the ankle and Achilles tendon.

_____ Sole
Entire bottom of the shoe should be flat, except for a gentle slope upward under the toes.

_____ Counter
Stiff portion of the shoe that wraps around the back of the heel to keep the foot in position inside.

_____ Vamp
Upper middle part of the shoe; aids in holding the foot in the shoe, where fastenings are commonly placed, to provide support and comfort.

_____ Toe Box
Front part of the shoe that provides space that allows toes to lie flat and have ample room to wiggle.

_____ Heel
Bottom part of the rear of the shoe that provides elevation.

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6 - Collar: Stiffens the back of the shoe for stability; may be padded for comfort. Intended to cushion the ankle and Achilles tendon.

2 - Sole: Entire bottom of the shoe should be flat, except for a gentle slope upward under the toes. Soles can be of hard materials (such as leather) or soft materials (such as crepe). Softer soles tend to be more comfortable and better able to absorb shock. The sole consists of:

- **Insole:** inside the shoe, cushioned to absorb the jolts of walking on hard surfaces.
- **Midsole:** between the outer sole and the foot bed; provides extra cushioning.
- **Outer sole:** very bottom of the shoe provides solid footing with a good traction (not slippery) and durability.

5 - Counter: Stiff portion of the shoe that wraps around the back of the heel to keep the foot in position inside. Helps stabilize the foot at the sides and back, preventing the heel from sliding up and down while walking. Not all shoes have counters.

3 - Vamp: Upper middle part of the shoe; aids in holding the foot in the shoe where fastenings, such as straps with buckles or lace-up or Velcro fasteners, are commonly placed to provide support and comfort.

4 - Heel: Bottom part of the rear of the shoe that provides elevation. Shoes should fit snugly in the heel. The higher the heel, the greater the pressure placed on the front of the foot.

1 - Toe Box: Front part of the shoe that provides space that allows toes to lie flat and have ample room to wiggle. Toe box may be rounded or pointed. Although the toe box should be spacious, too much space can cause blisters and abrasions.
**Men's shoes** must conform to shape of the feet and provide a wide toe box with sufficient horizontal and vertical space and a low heel (about half an inch high).

**Women's shoes** should be well constructed, fit snugly in the heel, and provide ample room in the toe area. The shoe should fit the widest part of the foot, provide cushioning, and have a soft, flexible upper. **Avoid high heels** (usually more than 2 inches) which have a pointed, narrow toe box; they can change body posture and cause backaches and foot disorders.

**Low-heel shoes** are safer, less damaging to the feet, and more comfortable than high-heel shoes.

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**Footwear Fit**

Most people find that their footwear needs vary according to their activities and activity levels. To ensure a proper fit:

**Always measure both feet when buying shoes.** The size of your feet can change as you grow older because feet tend to spread with age. Podiatrists recommend that you always have both feet measured before buying shoes. Ask the salesperson to measure both **length** and **width** of each foot. Your feet expand when bearing weight, so stand while your feet are being measured.

**Buy shoes to fit your larger foot.** The shoes you buy should be fitted to your longer and wider foot. However, this will help only if your feet are almost the same size. Select shoes that are shaped like your foot.

- **Try on shoes late in the day.** Feet tend to swell after standing or sitting during the day.

- **During the fitting process, make sure there is enough space** ($^{\frac{3}{8}}$ to $^{\frac{1}{2}}$ inch—about as wide as your thumbnail) from the end of your longest toe, not necessarily your big toe, to the end of the shoe when you are standing.
New shoes should feel comfortable when you try them on. If shoes feel too tight, don't buy them. Any new pair of shoes should not require a “break-in” period. Walk around in the shoes to make sure they fit well and feel comfortable.

Your heel should fit comfortably and be held firmly in place in the shoe. Look and feel inside your shoes before putting them on. Make sure the lining is not torn and that there are no foreign objects or rough areas in the shoe.

Try on new footwear with the type of socks or hose you usually wear with that type of shoe.

Wear shoes that offer good foot protection. Soles should be leather or composition rubber. Rubber heels are best for wear, comfort, and traction.

Don’t stockpile shoes. The glue hardens with time, and the soles deteriorate. Buy newer pairs of shoes only as needed.

Shoe Materials
The material from which shoes are made can affect fit and comfort.

For maximum comfort, select shoes made of soft, flexible materials that mold the feet. Buy shoe uppers (top of the shoe that covers the upper part of the foot) made of materials such as leather, cotton canvas, or stretchy man-made fabrics that are strong yet supple. These materials permit moisture to evaporate.

Avoid uppers made of plastics, vinyl, or stiff materials. Such materials don’t allow the foot to stretch easily to accommodate the foot shape and can cause blisters.
Sock Selection

Wear socks or stockings with your footwear to keep your feet dry.

**Wear clean, well-fitting absorbent socks or stockings made of the new high-tech synthetics, cotton, or wool which cushion and protect feet from pressure.** Because feet sweat, select socks that allow your feet to “breathe.”

**Choose socks carefully. They should be loose but not wrinkled.** Avoid socks, stockings, or pantyhose that are too tight and may reduce circulation.

**Seamless socks are a good idea for foot protection.** Socks, stockings, and hose should preferably be free from seams, holes, or bumpy areas (not mended) to avoid irritation, blisters, or other skin injuries. Seamless socks assure a smooth fit, eliminating pressure points that hinder circulation.

Toenail Care Checklist

- When you want to trim your toenails, make sure you can see well and have adequate sensation (feeling) in your feet.

- Use clean nail clippers to trim toenails in the natural curve of your toes.

- Don’t cut out or dig down at the corners, as this can lead to ingrown nails.

- **Never** use sharp instruments such as scissors and razor blades to trim or taper nail corners.

- Use an emery board to gently file and smooth sharp edges of toenails.

- If you have a problem cutting your own toenails because of thick, hard, or curled toenails, or you have trouble seeing your feet clearly, ask your doctor or a foot doctor (podiatrist) to trim your toenails.
**Foot Notes**

*A nutritionally balanced diet provides necessary nutrients and energy for your feet.*

**Avoid extreme temperatures.** Protect your feet from too-hot or too-cold temperatures.

**Avoid being overweight.** Additional weight can adversely affect feet causing certain types of heel and arch problems.

**Do not use hot water bottles, heating pads, or electric blankets without seeking advice from your doctor.** Some older people, especially diabetics, need to avoid heating devices and heated footbaths because they might burn their feet.

**Avoid smoking.** It slows blood circulation to the feet and can worsen foot and leg problems.

**Rotate your footwear.** Switch shoes daily so footwear has a chance to dry out between wearings. It may take 12 to 24 hours of airing for shoes to dry.

**Consider using elastic (no-tie) shoelaces.** They offer an easy-to-fasten alternative to traditional shoelaces for the elderly, the single-handed, and those with arthritis or other physical disabilities.
Physical activity like walking stimulates blood flow in your feet and improves circulation. Also, walking promotes weight control and a sense of well-being. Contact your physician before starting a walking program.

Stretching before and after walking may help prevent foot injuries. Avoid overusing muscles. Incorporate slow stretching before a workout and a cooling-down period afterward.

Walk on level and soft ground (grass or dirt paths that are flat). Wear sturdy, comfortable shoes that do not slip on your feet and that protect and support the foot and ankle.

Assistive devices like canes or walkers can enhance mobility. Select walking shoes that are lightweight and flexible and have good shock absorption and traction.

Do not walk barefoot. It offers no support for the foot or ankle. Walking barefoot—especially in places like gyms and locker rooms or at the beach—increases the risk for injury and fungal infection.

Do not walk when you have pain or open sores that rub on shoes. If your feet and legs start to hurt, stop and rest for a while. If necessary, rest your feet for brief periods throughout the day, preferably elevating them on a footstool to improve circulation.

Cold weather can cause numbness in feet. This can limit your ability to detect trauma or wounds to the feet. It also makes surfaces harder, exerting more shock on the feet and ankles. If possible, walk at the local mall, gym, or indoor track.

Wear extra socks and footwear such as fleece-lined boots to protect your feet from the cold.
Protecting Feet from Common Problems

Being familiar with some frequent foot conditions as well as with basic care and prevention can help older adults avoid complications.

Corns and Calluses

- Wear properly sized shoes (not too tight or too short) with a roomy toe box to prevent corns and calluses.
- Treating corns and calluses yourself may be harmful, especially if you have diabetes or poor circulation.
- **Never** remove part of a toenail or treat corn or callus buildup using razor blades, knives, or scissors, which can damage your skin. If you have corns or calluses, a podiatrist or physician can determine the cause and provide treatment.

Don’t use over-the-counter medicine or chemicals such as corn plasters or liquid corn or callus removers unless your doctor recommends them. They contain acids that destroy the tissue but do not treat the cause. Sometimes, these medicines reduce the need for surgery.

Dry Skin

- After washing feet, apply a good moisturizing lotion daily to the tops and bottoms of your feet.
- Lotion helps keep skin on your feet from drying out and cracking.
- **Do not** put lotion between your toes.
- Avoid using too much soap. It can have a drying effect if used too often.

Bunions

- Wear shoes that are longer and wider to provide space for bunions; i.e., low-heel shoes with a roomy toe box.
- Avoid shoes with seams at or near the big toe joint. You may be able to have shoes stretched to fit a bunion.
Athlete’s Foot

- Thoroughly clean and dry your feet, especially between toes.
- Change your shoes and socks daily to help keep feet dry. If your feet sweat excessively, then change your socks a few times a day.
- Expose your feet to sun whenever possible to keep them dry. Use a sunscreen to prevent feet from burning.
- Wear well-ventilated shoes. Select shoe materials such as leather which “give” and “breathe.”
- Dust feet daily with a moisture-absorbing foot powder.
- Don’t go barefoot. Instead, wear nonskid, waterproof footwear in locker rooms and public showers.

Ingrown Toenails

- Use care in trimming toenails. See Toenail Care Checklist.
- Leave the nails a little longer at the corners so that the sharp edges don’t cut into the skin.
- Wear roomy shoes.
- Keep your feet clean and dry.

Blisters

- Wear shoes with a high roomy toe box to decrease friction between the toes and shoes.
- Apply a protective pad (moleskin) or an adhesive bandage over the blister.
- If you do get a blister or sore from your shoes, do not break or “pop” it. This increases the risk of an infection.
- If a blister does break, wash the area, apply an antibiotic ointment, and cover it with a sterile bandage until it heals.
- If signs of infection develop, such as redness or swelling, seek medical attention immediately.
Foot Care Resources

American Podiatric Medical Association
1-800-FOOTCARE
http://www.apma.org

APMA’s 75,000-Mile Check-Up
The American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA) recommends a foot check-up at 75,000 miles (around age 50). To take the check-up, get the free booklet How Fit Are Your Feet?
- Call 1-800-366-8273, or
- Visit http://www.apma.org, or
- Write APMA, 9312 Older Georgetown Road, Dept. P, Bethesda, MD 20814

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
To get the free brochure If the Shoe Fits, Wear It, call 1-800-824-BONES.

American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society
202-223-1120
http://www.aofas.org

Pedorthic Footwear Association
1-800-673-8447
http://www.pedorthics.org

National Institute on Aging (provides information on a variety of health and aging topics)
1-800-222-2225
http://www.nia.nih.gov/nia

Foot Health (from the publisher of Podiatry Management magazine)
http://www.foothealth.com/10.htm

Articles