
Diabetes & Preventing Amputations

About Diabetes

Diabetes is common among American Indian tribes. Diabetes can cause complications such as vision changes, kidney problems, and blood flow (circulation) problems.

Another common and serious diabetes complication is neuropathy, which causes a loss of feeling in the feet. With this loss of feeling, it is easier for people to injure their feet without even feeling them get hurt. Also, it is harder for sores on the feet to heal because of the loss of circulation (blood flow) to the feet.

Because healing is slowed down, injuries or sores on the feet and toes can easily become infected. This often leads to amputation, resulting in the loss of a toe, foot, or even a leg. In 1992-1993, a study of amputations was done to learn how to prevent them. The study tried to find out what causes some diabetics to have a higher risk of amputation.

The medical charts of 432 Sioux people in the Aberdeen Area, who have diabetes, were examined during 1992-1993. Medical information related to diabetes was recorded from each of the charts. No names were recorded in this study, so all the information taken from the charts remained confidential. Information from this study was then added to other known information about diabetes, and suggestions were made that will help prevent amputations.

Study Findings

- * Toes are amputated more often than feet or legs.
- * The most common problem that leads to amputations is an ulcer (open soar) that does not heal.
- * Sometimes ulcers come from common injuries: stepping on a rock in bare feet; getting blisters from tight shoes; getting a splinter from a wood floor; or dropping something heavy on the toes, such as a book or frozen food.
- * Foot ulcers can be healed when attended to carefully.
- * Foot ulcers can lead to an amputation quickly, even in a few weeks.
- * Men seem to be at risk of having amputations at a younger age than women.
- * It is more common for people who have had diabetes for many years to have amputations, but this is not always the case.
- * People who have not had diabetes for long are also at risk for amputation.
- * Medical problems, such as peripheral vascular disease (poor circulation) and neuropathy (loss of feeling), increase the chances for amputation.
- * Some people with foot problems wait too long before going to the clinic, and often the problem becomes serious before they get medical help.
- * Health professionals do not always check feet during clinic visits so a diabetic person should remind him/her to do a foot exam each time.

Prevention

A number of things can help prevent diabetic amputations:

- * Know about the lack of feeling (neuropathy) in feet and legs that often comes with diabetes.
- * Protect your feet by always wearing shoes that are the right size and that fit comfortably.
- * Never go barefoot.
- * Check inside shoes for nails or rough edges before putting them on.
- * Get someone to help check your feet every day, including between the toes, and on the bottoms to look for any open sores, cracks in the skin, calluses, redness, swelling, or pus.
- * Clean your feet each day with water and mild soap, then put lotion on them to keep the skin from cracking.
- * Wear clean socks every day.
- * Trim the toenails and never use anything sharp on the feet.
- * Go to the clinic to check on a small sore, splinter, infection, or callus on the foot, even if it does not hurt.
- * Return to the clinic until a sore or infection has completely healed, even if it takes many visits.
- * Avoid extreme temperatures to the feet such as hot water bottles, heating pads, or ice packs.
- * Quit smoking because it decreases the blood flow (circulation) to the feet.

Need More Information?

Ask for more information about taking care of your feet at the clinic, or from a Public Health Nurse in the community. Health care providers are interested in helping people with diabetes avoid the serious complication of amputation.

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