

Dementia and Foot Health



Healthy feet are an important part of our wellbeing, and are essential for a person living with dementia to remain mobile and active. Many people are not aware that foot problems can impact our mental and physical health. By taking a few minutes to care for our loved one's feet, we can increase their wellbeing, help them remain mobile, prevent falls, and improve their quality of life. Early recognition and medical interventions can reduce the severity and length of treatment needed for foot problems.

But, early recognition can be difficult!

As you have probably noticed, it's often challenging for someone with cognitive impairment to communicate pain, discomfort, or unmet needs. Often, an individual with dementia will communicate their wants and needs through action or change in personality. For example, hunger may be communicated by irritability. Dislike of being cold may be communicated by refusal to take a shower, and feeling the need to have a purpose might be communicated by walking about.

... I never thought about feet!

Well, have you ever noticed your loved one refusing to go outside for their usual walk around the garden? Or perhaps they have stopped getting their mail from the mailbox at the end of the driveway. Maybe your loved one has started hitting care partners when it is time to get dressed.

Do we ever stop to think that maybe their feet hurt, they have an ingrown toenail, or their shoes don't fit properly? One should never assume that people behave in such ways "because they have dementia." In fact, we should always ask, "why is this happening?" and, in this case, try to literally, walk a mile in their shoes!

So, exactly what do feet have to do with it?

Foot Problems and Aging

As we age, our feet flatten, become wider, and the fatty padding on the bottom of our feet wears down, leaving bones and joints more exposed to possible damage. Since skin on the feet becomes more fragile with aging, bunions, corns, and calluses can form, as well as ingrown toenails, skin breaks, or fungal infections. Arthritis, gout, and plantar fasciitis are ailments that can result in foot pain.

These disorders can cause soreness, discomfort, and balance problems, making the affected person reluctant to walk. Individuals with diabetes will need to be observed closely for foot discomfort. Even a small cut can lead to a severe infection which can compromise one's health. Look for red areas or spots on the feet which could be a sign of an infection, and foot pain at night which could suggest circulatory problems.

Foot Problems and Dementia

Foot discomfort can lead to impaired gait and a potential fall risk in people who have cognitive impairment, which is why proper foot care is important. Since many living with dementia may not be able to accurately communicate if they are experiencing foot pain, care partners should be observant for any changes in physical or emotional well-being. Keep an eye out for problems in walking such as unsteadiness, walking more slowly or shuffling while walking. If the person you're caring for has developed any of the above conditions, please contact a podiatrist.

Keeping Feet Healthy

- **Limit slipper wear and encourage well-fitting shoes.** Many people wear slippers all day, which encourages shuffling rather than walking, and can contribute to tripping and falls. Comfortable, well-fitting shoes can make a big difference to someone's mobility. Try to steer the person away from pointed toed shoes, shoes with heels or strappy sandals, even if that's what they wore in the past, and look for a sturdy pair of walking shoes or sneakers that are measured and fitted at the shoe store. Try to find a shoe with a wide toe box that has plenty of wiggle room. Also be sure to check shoes for small debris before putting on.
- **Try an evening foot soak.** Many people find it very relaxing to soak their feet in a warm basin of water or a massaging heated foot spa. Foot soaks that include Epsom salts, coconut oil, tea tree oil, or other essential oils not only aid in relaxation, but help to remove dead skin, prevent infections, and moisturize tired, sore feet. After a soak, dry the feet thoroughly (including between the toes), apply moisturizer, and cover the feet with breathable cotton socks. This promotes relaxation prior to sleep.
- **Walk daily if the person is free from foot pain.** Exercise like walking helps the body release hormones that make us feel great and helps provide a nourishing environment for the growth of brain cells. We know that physical exercise is crucial for maintaining blood flow to the brain, reducing the risk of heart attack, stroke, and diabetes, but it also helps protect against the risk factors for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Even walking briefly for 20 minutes facilitates information processing and memory functions. Remember to check shoes for small debris before putting them on.
- **Encourage safe movement.** Depending on the individual's ability to ambulate independently, care partners should keep precautions in place to avoid falls and injuries. Proper use of a rollator, walker, cane, etc. should be considered if applicable to decrease risk for falls.
- **Visit the Podiatrist** Address problems such as corns, bunions, sores, or ingrown toenails by consulting a podiatrist. They can also help to make sure the person's toenails are cut properly and on a regular basis.

MARY AND MARK'S STORY

Mary is a devoted wife, working over 40 hours a week as a college professor. Her husband, Mark, is a retired landscaper. Mark has been diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment but manages to care for himself during the day. Over the last few months, Mary has noticed a slight decline in his ability to take his medications on time, prepare food, and notices he is not as active as he used to be.

One day, as Mark was searching for an item in the garage while barefoot, he stepped on a small piece of glass. Due to neuropathy in his feet, he did not realize anything happened, and it went undetected for about three weeks. Mary had been so busy with work, she did not realize anything had happened. One morning, Mary noticed Mark limping and not putting weight on his left foot. They went to the emergency room immediately, as Mark's foot was swollen and had an infection around the wound. Unfortunately, Mark needed emergency surgery to save his foot, or it would have to be amputated due to the severity and spread of the infection.

Mary felt terrible for not noticing the wound earlier, and Mark was embarrassed that he was unable to feel the piece of glass or communicate his needs. They realized that having more assistance around the home would be beneficial to everyone, as Mary couldn't cut down her hours at work, and keeping up with the home and care for Mark was becoming too much. They arranged for a home health aide to come five times a week to help with Mark's care, including reminders to wear proper clothing and shoes, take him to appointments, manage medications, and to keep him company. They both learned the importance of wearing well fitted shoes during the day and checking his feet for injuries and discomfort often. Mark now sees a podiatrist regularly to maintain proper foot care.