Understanding Diabetic Foot Ulcers
Diabetes and Your Feet

If you have diabetes, foot care is very important. That’s because diabetes can cause changes in your body that make you much more likely to develop foot ulcers and other conditions.

By taking care of your feet every day, you may be able to prevent diabetic foot ulcers.

You can start by:

- Controlling your blood sugar levels
- Getting your feet checked regularly both at home and by your healthcare provider
- Notifying your healthcare provider right away if you have a sore on your foot
- Attending all of your appointments with your healthcare providers

Diabetic foot ulcers may be easier to treat if they are caught early, so read this brochure to find out how with your doctor’s help you can take the steps you need to keep your feet healthy.

What Are Diabetic Foot Ulcers?

Diabetic foot ulcers (DFUs), commonly known as sores, are wounds that can develop on the feet of people with diabetes. They are often difficult to heal and may become chronic in nature.

A DFU can be found anywhere on the foot, but will often form on the bottom of toes, the heel, or the ball of the foot. There are several reasons that wounds may not heal, but one major reason may be that over time high blood sugar levels can injure your blood vessels, which may result in decreased blood flow to the wound.

DFUs are one of the most common complications in people with diabetes.

Among people with diabetes, up to 25% experience a DFU in their lifetime and 3.4% will experience a DFU each year.
**What Causes a DFU?**

There are several reasons why people with diabetes develop DFUs and why they can be hard to get rid of. Here are a few of the most important:

- A DFU often begins with an **injury** to the foot:⁹
  - A single major trauma such as a cut or scrape to the skin
  - A repetitive minor trauma such as a blister caused by rubbing on calluses or hammertoes

- People with diabetes commonly have nerve damage that causes numbness in the feet and hands. This is called **peripheral neuropathy**. As a result, a person with diabetes may not feel minor injuries or a DFU. Other symptoms of neuropathy include tingling, muscle weakness or a burning sensation.¹⁰

- With diabetes, people often develop poor circulation due to narrowed or blocked blood vessels. This condition is called **peripheral artery disease** or PAD.¹¹ When a person with PAD has a small cut or blister, reduced blood flow limits the body’s ability to heal.¹⁰

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**Complications of DFUs**

If not properly treated, DFUs may result in serious complications.⁴

When a DFU occurs, whether through normal wear and tear or an injury, layers of skin and foot tissue are destroyed, creating a wound in the foot. A non-healing, or chronic, wound may even lead to infection.¹³

Good foot care and proper footwear may help to prevent DFUs.¹⁴

It is critical to treat all wounds, so seek immediate medical attention if you notice a wound on your foot.

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Am I at Risk for DFUs?

Risk factors for developing a DFU include:15

- Past history of DFUs
- Poor blood sugar control
- Numbness that may lead to injuries you can’t feel (peripheral neuropathy)
- Circulation problems (PAD)
- Foot deformity
- Kidney disease (diabetic nephropathy)
- Vision problems
- Smoking

Be sure to discuss these with your doctor to see what applies to you.

DFU Prevention

DFU prevention depends on you—and there’s a lot you can do. Below are some important steps you can take to protect your feet from sores.9

- **Control your blood sugar levels**—Keep your blood sugar levels in your target range. Over time, high levels of blood sugar can do a lot of damage to your body. Keeping your blood sugar within the normal range may prevent complications.
- **Check your feet every day**—Look for cuts, bruises, spots, or blisters. Use a mirror to see all parts of your feet.
- **Have your feet inspected at least once a year**—Be sure to have a healthcare professional (such as your primary doctor or podiatrist) check your feet at least once a year.
- **Keep your feet clean and dry**—Wash your feet daily with warm water, always dry them, and keep your feet properly moisturized to prevent cracking.
- **Always use good footwear**—Always wear properly fitting socks and shoes—especially if you have bunions or hammertoes—to prevent rubbing or pressure.
- **Don’t walk barefoot**—Always protect your feet, especially if you have neuropathy (numbness).
- **If you see something, report it**—Call your doctor right away if you have a sore, cut or other problem with your foot.
- **Don’t self-treat**—If you have corns, calluses, or cuts that that don’t heal, contact your doctor immediately and let him/her handle it.
Learn More

With proper care, you may be able to prevent a DFU or avoid major complications. Take action using the simple steps from this brochure, and talk to your doctor to learn more about how you can keep your feet healthy.

The following organizations and educational programs offer information about foot care and DFUs:

American Diabetes Association
diabetes.org

American Podiatric Medical Association
apma.org

American Association of Diabetes Educators
diabeteseducator.org

Diabetes Life (dLife)
dlife.com

HealTogether
healtgether.com

National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse
diabetes.niddk.nih.gov

Save a Leg, Save a Life Foundation
savealegsavealife.org

References: