

DIABETIC FOOT ULCERS

BY SR ANNETTE ANDERSON (M.CUR)

Diabetic foot ulcers are small sores, or wounds on one or both feet of a patient with diagnosed or undiagnosed diabetes. The reasons this happens is that diabetes causes neuropathy which is nerve damage resulting in the patient not experiencing the warning sign of pain and then often does not realize that there is a wound on their foot/ feet until it becomes infected, bleeds and/ or smells as the infection spreads. Due to poor circulation, damaged blood vessels especially in the legs and foot, reduce blood flow which delays healing and may cause tissue death. Black spots on tips of toes or under the foot often indicate gangrene and treatment is dependent on the severity of the ulcer and underlying disease

Diabetes Mellitus is a systemic disease characterised by high blood sugar levels as the patients' body is unable to control the blood glucose levels effectively anymore. For a more in-depth look at diabetes, please read our article "Diabetes the Deadly Disease" in the "learn more about diabetes" section of medical conditions on our website.

Although the complications of prolonged and poorly controlled diabetes of peripheral nerve damage and poor circulation tend to be permanent, worsening of these complications can be reduced by treating your diabetes correctly with diet, medication and healthy lifestyle. The biggest causes of diabetic foot ulcers can often be prevented or delayed by taking exceptionally good care of your feet.

Big reversible causes for diabetic foot ulcers include ill-fitting shoes, foot deformities (such as bunions) which cause rubbing between the bone and shoe which in turn creates pressure points. This rubbing in a healthy foot usually causes blisters, which are painful and sore which prevents patients from wearing the shoes and treating the blisters. However, if diabetic patients, due to loss of sensation in their feet, they don't realise that this has happened and they continue to use the shoes which caused the problem, resulting in bigger wounds and infection.

Trauma to the feet is another largely reversible common cause in diabetic patients. This occurs with ingrown toenails or cutting toenails incorrectly and introducing infection. Another reversible cause is burns caused by hot water bottles, heaters and hot bean bags, which give patients deep burns as they cannot feel the pain. Many diabetic patients only realize that they have burnt themselves when they smell burnt flesh.

Symptoms include red, swollen, warm areas on foot; the presence of a drainage such as blood and or pus which often stains socks and shoes. Black tissue (eschar) around the sore, black spots on toes, numbness, tingling or itching feet with the possible presence of maggots.

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Treatment and preventative care:

As soon as you notice any symptoms listed above, consult your doctor immediately. Wound care may be simple as keeping the wound dry or need advanced wound care and debridement.

Off-loading reduces pressure and can be done by bedrest, special shoes, inserts, crutches or walking frames.

Foot care and inspection must happen daily to ensure early treatment and care.

Surgical treatment may include debridement (if the blood flow to the foot is sufficient to allow wound healing with advanced wound care) or amputation.

