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THE GOOD LIFE

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Touch Matters

By Dr. Kate Clayton-Jones, PhD, RN, CFCN,
and the founder of FootCare by Nurses



Dr. Kate Clayton-Jones

Good touch is something that benefits us all. But while it is hugely important to human growth and development, older adults are predominantly touch starved. This is not ok, because it leaves older adults more vulnerable and less healthy than they need to be.

It is understandable. Many older adults live alone, or they live with a spouse of many years and have lost the habit of communicating through touch. Some are afraid of touch because they have experienced bad touch, or only the touch of a partner, or touch that is not considerately applied. In the medical world, touch can be dehumanizing; think of a blood pressure cuff squeezed too tightly or a thermometer pushed too far into the mouth. Nevertheless, it's important to understand why good touch is vital, especially when applied to the care of feet. Many have read that feet affect

the rest of the body. Well, it's true, and if you ever have a good foot massage, your whole body will feel amazing.

Our hands have about 100,000 sensors, but our feet have about 300,000. Those sensors in the feet are responsible for picking up information about proprioception (the body's ability to sense its position and movement in space, without relying on visual input) and balance, along with heat, cold, and vibrations. These sensors influence our ability to remain upright in the world. Our toe tip pads hold sensors, and the nails are the pressure plates that the sensors push up against that are then connected to the nerve endings that connect into the rest of the body. Those pressure plates need to bend and flex to function. Stiff toes and thick nails don't bend or flex, which literally causes the senses to dull, and our balance to be thrown off.

We now know that our connective tissue has roots in the feet. It makes sense, we were all once a tiny egg that grew. The little buds with their sensors became our fingers and toes, and when we came out into the world we explored with our hands and feet, not just our eyes. All our sensors connected us with the world.

Our bodies are covered with millions of sensor cells that send information to the brain. While some areas of our bodies have fewer sensors than others, all sensors need to be stimulated to remain active, because just below those sensors lies our lymphatic system, an essential component of our immune system and a crucial component for

moving toxins from our bodies. Very gentle stroking and moving of our skin activates this system. Gently washing the skin is about touching the skin and moving the lymph system to release those toxins.

So, touching feet in a caring manner has great value. Taking a non-petroleum, non-paraffin-based lotion, or oil like coconut or sesame oil, and gently applying it between the toes and onto the skin of the foot to stimulate circulation and sensation is a gift. If you are unsure, look at the ingredients, and if you can't pronounce them or don't think it's edible, then maybe it's too complicated to put on your skin. Your skin is the largest organ of your body, and it doesn't like harsh chemicals. Some people don't like the feel of oil, but your skin will thank you. Oil is absorbed by the skin quickly—towel off the excess oil afterwards and put on a pair of socks to keep yourself from slipping. Then, go ahead and give each toe a little love squeeze—it will thank you by relaxing and becoming more flexible. A more flexible foot helps maintain balance and stability.

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It is lovely to be able to wind your fingers in between your toes, but if you can't reach, that's not a problem. Try attaching a sponge or a loofa to a stick or pick up a sponge paint brush from the hardware store and attach it to a stick. That will extend your reach so you can touch your toes. While applying that oil, try relaxing the foot and toes to gain the fullest range of motion as possible. Remaining limber and supple also releases tension, which, in turn, reduces pain.

If that is too hard, please don't be embarrassed to ask for help. If you do get a regular massage, which is highly recommended, it is ok to ask for more time spent on your hands and feet and also your ears—all three areas are filled with sensors that connect into the rest of the body. You, your immune system, your circulation, your skin, your body, and your health will thank you.

In the fall I wrote about the rock, paper, scissors exercise you can easily do with your feet. This combination of clenching the toes, spreading them wide, and moving the big toe and the little toes separately in a scissors-like motion helps greatly with maintaining intrinsic muscle strength. Adding gentle stroking and massaging of toes moves lymphatic fluids and energy and keeps our senses active. Kind and gentle touch is an amazing gift that we can give to ourselves and others. It cannot be replaced by the television or a device, and it is essential for our health and well-being. Most of our dulled-out senses happen because we don't take very good care of our sensors. We just expect them to work. Gentle touch reminds them, and us, that we are still here.