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A publication of

LifePath
options for independence

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THE GOOD LIFE

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Spring Is the Perfect Time to Assess the Health of Your Feet

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



We're arriving at the end of winter now, with the spring equinox arriving March 19. Winter forced many people to stop walking and stay indoors. Though this sounds cozy and is certainly a better choice than walking on slippery surfaces and chancing a fall, inactivity can lead to aches and pains. Feet that are stiff from inaction can cause one to lose balance and also affect other muscles, as we attempt to stay steady. This compensation throws us out of alignment and all of a sudden there's knee or hip pain, or both. Thankfully, there is much we can do to take care of ourselves and loved ones who might need some help.

Chronic muscle pain, whether it's an aching back, a stiff neck, or foot discomfort, is not an inevitable part of aging. Tension is the root cause of many problems, and tension in one part of the body can affect the whole body. A stiff neck can lead to shoulder pain. Favoring one shoulder causes an imbalance that can cause back pain and limping. Favoring one side of your body while limping can eventually affect the hips, knees, and feet. It's all connected, meaning that addressing tension anywhere can help the whole body.

That callus on your big toe indicates tension in your feet, an unconscious toe-gripping on shoes that aren't fitting properly or aren't tied correctly. Removing and examining a shoe's insole will reveal toe gripping, with indentations as evidence. At Footcare by Nurses we are careful to identify this, because tension can affect balance and lead to falls, even indoors, and falls compromise quality of life and longevity.

Imagine trying to balance on curved toes instead of relaxed and spread-out feet exquisitely designed to hold your body upright and stable. A tree stands tall only because of its roots spreading wide underground, and a person stands tall and balanced when his or her feet are working correctly.

Feet are complicated. Each foot is made up of 26 bones, 30 joints, and more than 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments, all of which work together to provide support, balance, and mobility. Often people think of foot care cosmetically. They visit a spa, get their nails clipped and polished, and do not think of the underlying bones and joints that might need attention.

I advise my patients to roll their feet to the sides when sitting. Imagine the soles of your feet facing each other as much as possible. This stretches muscles, improves circulation, and even allows hip muscles to relax. People who are reading or engaged in any sedentary activity will feel better if they get up from time to time for some gentle stretching. Roll your neck and shoulders, rotate your wrists and ankles. Breathe; take some deep slow breaths

to expand your chest, let those breaths out slowly. Increased energy will follow, and this has an effect on your feet and overall health, since research has shown a relationship between chronic pain and disabilities. Nurses trained in evidence-based care take a holistic approach with every patient. They know that releasing tension in one part of the body can increase blood flow and sometimes release pain and long-held emotions.

If you are old enough, most senior centers offer free classes in gentle yoga and stretching, and if you can get out, I'd recommend giving them a try, perhaps on a day when there's a foot clinic. People who are home-bound can still do the relaxation exercises I mentioned above. It doesn't take a great deal of time and the rewards are significant.

While you are caring for those stiff muscles, don't forget to nourish the skin on your feet. Skin becomes dry in our heated homes and this can lead to cracks and possibly infection. Moisture can collect next to your skin if socks aren't wicking it away, and this can result in fungal infections like athlete's foot. You do not need to go to a gym or public facility to contract athlete's foot, by the way. The spores can live in a home, too. By keeping your feet clean, dry, and moisturized, you can maintain healthy skin.

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Additional tips

Wear the right socks: Merino wool socks do not bunch or become damp from sweat. They wick moisture away from your foot, which is optimal.

Try compression socks: Moderate compression socks help prevent blood from pooling in your lower legs. They improve circulation and increase comfort.

Check the fit of your shoes: Remove the insole. If you see toe prints, your toes are gripping to keep your shoes in place. That shoe is either too big or laced improperly. The objective is to secure your heel firmly against the back of the shoe so there is no slipping. It's that slipping that causes calluses and other painful conditions.

Examine your feet when you take your shoes off: If the skin on your feet is pale and damp and your feet feel cold, you need to dry them thoroughly (don't forget between the toes) and warm them in clean merino wool socks.

Moisturize: I recommend coconut oil as a moisturizer. It penetrates and nourishes the skin.

Soak your feet from time to time: Soaking your feet in apple cider vinegar fights bacteria and fungus infections, restores the skin's PH balance, and softens skin, sometimes reducing calluses.

See a foot care provider: Regular visits will ensure consistency of care. Nails require trimming, not only to look better but to function properly, and periodic examinations can identify problems early. Early detection is always the best course in health care.