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A publication of

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THE GOOD LIFE

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Foot Care for Fall



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

As the crisp weather signals the change of seasons, and floors become cold in the morning, let's give our feet some special attention to prepare for the winter months ahead. Feet are literally the foundation for our body: they allow us to be mobile, they pump blood back to our hearts, and they connect us to the world. Any issue with feet affects the whole body.

In cold weather, there is a risk that the floor will chill the feet and then chilblains, a precursor to frostbite, could occur. Insulation against the cold is warranted but consider your needs before buying socks. At FootCare by Nurses, we suggest considering fit and function before shopping. Seemingly inexpensive socks, too often combined with synthetic fibers, may seem like a bargain but turn out to be the cause of blisters, skin and fungal issues, suboptimal skin health, and pressure areas—all potentially costly choices. No one needs an infection, pain, or a foot-health-related fall.

A sock is meant to protect the foot. A sock that is too thick or loose makes it difficult to walk properly or put on a shoe. Socks that are too tight in the wrong place can cut off circulation and make feet colder. A sock that bunches can cause blisters; a sock that does not absorb perspiration and wick it away from your skin will make your feet feel colder, and that moist environment can encourage bacterial and fungal growth.

There is an art to choosing the right sock. Socks are an investment in health and wellness. Prioritize your needs—warmth, protection, comfort, compression, and fashion. Know what outcome you are looking for. A protecting, good-quality sock ought to conform to your foot shape, stay in place, and be a delight.

First choose the material—there are pros and cons.

- Cotton is natural, soft, breathable, absorbent, easy to wash, and durable. It is often quite inexpensive. The downside: Cotton absorbs and holds moisture and has little insulating value. (\$2-\$16 per pair)
- Rayon/ polyester/ nylon/ synthetic socks are inexpensive, soft, easy to wash, and durable, but do not wick moisture away. Perspiration clings to the skin of the feet leading to suboptimal skin health. They can be insulating, but aren't breathable. (\$2-\$16 per pair)
- Wool is an excellent insulator. It wicks moisture away and will keep your feet warm in frigid weather. Many people think they are allergic to wool socks because some wools can irritate the skin. However, Merino wool, alpaca, and yak have different fibers and are non-irritating. Wool is insulating, which means in the summer it keeps feet cool, and in the winter warm. Good woolen socks can be expensive (\$16-\$30 per pair)
- Silk is insulating, wicking, and lightweight. Silk can be expensive, and hard to get. But an investment in silk socks is a treat.

There is an art to choosing the right sock.

I believe almost everyone can benefit from wearing compression socks. They can help the lower legs move blood and lymph back to the heart, and any help that you can give the legs is beneficial to cardiac health. There is science in these socks. The compression is measured in mmHg and has to do with the elasticity. The higher the numbers the higher the pressure exerted by the sock weave. The gentlest and lowest compression is typically 8-15mmHg (appropriate for almost everyone). Standard is 15-20mmHg (appropriate for anyone active), medical grade class 1 is 20-30 mmHg and is best for those who sit for a long time. Very strong medical grade is 30-40mmHg and 40-50 mmHg, and these are doctor recommended.

Ultimately, for compression to work, the sock ought to fit well. Many nylon drug store garments leave nasty rings below

the knee and are sloppy on feet, giving no compression benefit. The newer engineered socks are an investment in health and are amazing. As compression becomes more popular and beneficial, we invite everyone to try them, and our knowledgeable nursing staff can help.

In addition to finding the right socks, care of the skin in winter is essential. Your feet need oils so the skin can act as a protective barrier. In my next column, look for a discussion of moisturizing and hydration. You can also find ongoing foot care information at www.FootCarebynurses.net.

Staying Hydrated From the Inside Out

Hydration status manifests on the skin. At FootCare by Nurses we spend time helping elders understand the importance of hydration, along with personalized strategies to do that. Hydration is not only about how much water you drink. Human bodies need the right combination of fluids and salts to function. Broth soups, lemonade, drinking milk, and eating fruit are great ways to hydrate.

Like your face and hands, your feet need moisture, so the skin can act as the protective and sensory barrier that it is designed to be. Cracks and fissures from suboptimal skin care are painful and can even lead to infection. Older skin needs tender loving care. Research and experience have taught us that natural oils like sesame or coconut oil or anything you can eat, work really well on older feet. There are also low-cost lotions that have simple edible ingredients. The important thing is to assess the efficacy of your lotion choices. Skin on the feet and lower legs should be pain free, soft, smooth, and not feel sticky. Not only is the oil good for your skin, the act of rubbing it into your feet and toes releases tension and allows toes to move more freely, thereby reducing pain, improving sensation and range of motion, and even improving balance.

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