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THE GOOD LIFE

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Foot Care Enhances Postural Stability

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

Dr. Kate Clayton-Jones, PhD, RN, CFCN

Certain healthy habits are so ingrained that people don't think twice about them. Daily tooth brushing, and regular visits to the doctor, dentist, and optician are built into most people's schedules. Evidence-based foot care should also be included in everyone's routine. Healthy, pain-free feet increase mobility, allow people to remain active, and improve balance.

An aspect of foot care that is often overlooked is the need to maintain sensation and as much flexibility in the toes, ankles, and supporting muscles as possible. Stiff feet and the inability to feel one's toes will hinder balance. Poor balance leads to falls, and falls lead to injuries that are often debilitating. Balance is an innate sense that we develop in infancy. It is the ability to distribute your weight in a way that lets you stand or move without falling, or recover if you trip.

> **"I have a foot version of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" that I share with patients to help them find and exercise their foot muscles."**

The movements that allow us humans to walk upright are complex. We are the only creatures on earth that do almost everything on two legs. Those feet that connect us to the ground are our root system. They have 26 bones and lots of ligaments and tendons that work hard, and they are small in comparison to the body's total mass. Having inflexible feet not only impairs balance and stride, it also negatively impacts lymphatic flow (immune system) and cardiac (blood) flow.

What many people don't know is that foot and toe function is also tied to brain function, and regular foot strengthening has a direct impact on cognition. That is because postural stability requires the gathering and processing of sensory information. Our toes contain some of the sensors that send messages to the brain about the terrain and balance, and the brain sends messages back to muscles in the legs, feet, and toes to help us stay balanced.

Postural sway is one of the many diagnostic tools medical professionals use to determine cognitive decline. While this decline can and does occur due to issues with brain function, loss of connection to the foot sensors that feed the brain can also contribute. Maintaining foot flexibility can keep those sensors in good working order.

I have a foot version of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" that I share with patients to help them find and exercise their foot muscles. This technique can be done at any time, and you do not have to reach your feet; you just need to know how to move them, and you may be surprised to find that they don't always move as directed. It takes a little practice.

First make a "rock" by curling the toes in, and holding firm and rock like—hold for a couple of seconds. Next, release the toes and spread them wide like a flat piece of paper. Try to do it in a relaxed manner without straining. Finally, raise the big toe and lower the other toes and then reverse by lowering the big toe and raising the little ones, mimicking a scissor motion. If it's a little difficult, be patient; you are learning to connect with the muscles and joints in your feet. Repeated a few times a day, this exercise yields feet and toes that are relaxed and strong and better able to distribute the body's weight. These movements also increase flexibility, blood flow, strength, comfort, and balance. To watch a video demonstration, go to **www.footcarebynurses.net.**

Lack of flexibility in the feet can be caused by many factors. Over time, feet can stiffen up from poor-fitting shoes, injury, and lack of use or overuse, but at the end of the day, keeping feet healthy, mobile, and protected is important for good health. Stiff toes stiffen ankles, and stiff ankles stiffen hips. A body that is stiff cannot easily respond if it becomes off balance, hence a fall. A stiff body is also painful. Gentle movements all the way up through the shoulders release tension and also pain. Our ability, as humans, to regain balance depends on the neural pathways functioning to the best of their abilities. Postural stability is the head and the feet working together.

Everyone can benefit from playing "Rock, Paper, Scissors" with their feet. If you are unable to do these exercises, don't give up. Something is better than nothing. No matter the age, gentle massage, and range of motion exercises with the toes, feet, ankles, knees, and hips makes a huge positive impact on balance. These exercises can be done by an individual, or by a caregiver.

While couches and lounge chairs may be comfortable, a body that moves is a lot healthier and in less pain than a body that doesn't move, and having happy, pain-free feet is not only possible, but also important. A walk is good for body, mind, and spirit. To prepare for a walk with or without the help of a walker, spend a few minutes playing "Rock, Paper, Scissors" with your feet, and make sure your shoes fit well and are properly fastened so you do not need to clench your toes and your feet do not slip around in your shoes. Wear good socks, take a deep breath, relax your shoulders, and look ahead with your eyes forward and your chin parallel to the ground. Resist the temptation to look down at your feet, as this can cause neck and back pain. Take a step and then another—your body and mind will be grateful.