

Best foot forward

Look after your feet and
reduce your risk of falling





Introduction

Foot problems such as corns, calluses, or weak ankles can be painful and may increase the risk of falling. But the good news is that, whatever our age, we don't have to put up with foot pain or discomfort.

There's a lot we can do to protect our feet. This leaflet will show you how. Why not have a go at our activities to make your feet and ankles stronger and more flexible? We've also included useful tips on finding the right kind of shoes for improved support and balance. And find out why regular foot checks and basic footcare are an essential part of staying active and steady on your feet.

Improving strength and flexibility in your feet

Doing some basic foot and ankle exercises will reduce your risk of falling by improving your strength and flexibility.

Doing these movements regularly will stretch and strengthen your toes and ankles and improve circulation and flexibility in your feet. Aim to do them for 30 minutes three times a week.

If you have a condition that may be affected by exercise, get medical advice before starting any exercise programme.

Please seek medical advice for guidance regarding appropriate exercise levels, precautions and use of exercise equipment. It is particularly important to seek such advice if you suffer from an ongoing medical condition that may be affected by exercise. Always start any exercise programme slowly, and never force or strain. If you feel any soreness, strain, discomfort, distress or other symptoms, stop the exercise and seek medical advice immediately.

Exercises and images reproduced with thanks to Dr. Martin Spink.



Foot and ankle home exercises

Exercise one

Ankle circling (warm-up)

Set-up

- 1 Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet on the ground.

Clockwise circling exercise

- 1 Lift one foot off the ground and hold it up in the air.
- 2 Using slow and gentle movements, rotate ankle and circle foot in a clockwise direction, making as large a circle as possible.
- 3 Repeat ten times in a clockwise direction, then place the foot down to rest.
- 4 Lift the other foot up and make ten clockwise circles using this foot.

Anti-clockwise circling exercise

- 1 Lift the first foot off the ground again and hold it up in the air.
- 2 This time, rotate the ankle and circle the foot in an anti-clockwise direction, making as large a circle as possible.
- 3 Repeat ten times in an anti-clockwise direction and then place the foot down to rest.
- 4 Lift the other foot up and make ten anti-clockwise circles using this foot.

Quantity

Do only one set of ten circles in each direction on each foot.



Exercise two

Ankle dorsiflexion (toe-up)

Set-up

- 1 Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet flat on the ground.

Exercise

- 1 Lift your toes on both feet off the ground as high as you can and hold for ten seconds.
- 2 Ensure that your heels remain in contact with the ground at all times.

Quantity

Start with one set of three repetitions, holding for ten seconds each time.

If you can do three repetitions without difficulty or muscle soreness the next day, increase by one to four repetitions of ten seconds.

Keep increasing the number of repetitions until you reach ten. It does not matter if you do not reach ten repetitions.



Exercise three

Double heel raise exercise

Set-up

- 1 Stand in front of a wall with hands on the wall for balance and your feet flat on the ground at a comfortable distance apart.

Exercise

- 1 Slowly rise up onto your toes.
- 2 Rise up as high as you can, then slowly lower yourself back down onto the ground.
- 3 Repeat the exercise ten times.

Quantity

Do three sets of ten repetitions.

Have a 30 second rest in between each set.

Progression

Start with three sets of ten repetitions.

Once you can complete all three sets of ten repetitions without any difficulty or soreness the next day, increase the number of repetitions by two to 12, and do three sets of 12 repetitions.

Keep increasing the number of repetitions by two until you reach 50, or as many as you are able to. It does not matter if you cannot go up to 50 repetitions.



Exercise four

Toe strengthening exercise

Introduction

Picking up marbles with toes.

Set-up

- 1 Sit comfortably in a chair.
- 2 Place 20 marbles on the floor and an empty container by the side of the marbles.

Exercise

- 1 Use your toes to pick up a marble off the floor.
- 2 Release it into the container.
- 3 Keep picking up the marbles with your toes until all 20 marbles have been picked up and released into the container.
- 4 Tip the marbles out onto the floor again, and repeat the exercise with your other foot.

Quantity

Repeat the exercise twice with each foot, each time picking up 20 marbles.

If you have difficulty picking up all 20 marbles with your toes, just pick up as many as you are able to and gradually build up to 20 marbles over time.



Finding the right shoes

Shoes that fit well protect and support your feet and may improve your balance and stability.

Keep your shoes in good condition – check for uneven heel wear or worn soles. If you can, get your feet measured when buying new shoes as your foot shape can change with age. Shoes should be comfortable when you try them on.

If your shoes don't fit well they can make even mild foot problems worse. Don't buy them if they're too tight thinking you can break them in. It's a good idea to shop for shoes in the afternoon if your feet swell during the day.

You don't have to buy specially-made or expensive footwear. Follow the tips on our handy shoe diagram and you should be able to find the right shoes at an affordable price. You can also ask your chiropodist for advice on the best footwear for you.

Indoor footwear

Walking indoors in bare feet, socks or tights can increase your risk of falling.

Avoid wearing soft, floppy, loose-fitting or open-backed slippers such as mules (slip-ons) because these can cause you to trip.

Look for slippers that have velcro fastening and a cushioned sole, with a high collar at the back that fits snugly around your ankle, helping you to improve stability.

Well-fitting shoes provide better support than well-fitting slippers. If you are unsteady on your feet or have already had a fall, consider wearing comfortable shoes at home instead of slippers.



What makes a shoe safe or unsafe?

Safe shoe



- 1 Make sure the shoe has a firm heel collar to support your ankle, and that it fits snugly round your heel.
- 2 Look for a low, broad heel. This provides good ground contact which is best for keeping you stable.
- 3 Check that the soles are flexible, lightweight, slip-resistant, and made from rubber.
- 4 Choose shoes which are firmly secured with adjustable fastenings such as velcro, straps with buckles, or laces, to prevent your toes being crushed or rubbed by your feet slipping forward.

Unsafe shoe



- 1 Slip-on shoes such as sling-backs or moccasins can slip off easily and trip you up.
- 2 Don't buy shoes with slippery soles, such as leather soles, because they can cause you to fall, especially in wet weather.
- 3 Try not to choose shoes with a heel higher than one inch, or with a narrow heel. High heels or narrow heels make your feet unstable and can cause your ankles to turn.

Keeping your feet healthy

Regular foot care will help keep your feet healthy and prevent foot problems that increase the risk of falling.

Here are some simple footcare tips that will help keep your feet healthy. If you have trouble reaching your feet, or if your eyesight isn't as good as it used to be, ask a friend or relative to help you.

- **Inspect your feet** regularly to identify any problems at an early stage and stop them getting worse. Look out for verrucas, corns, in-growing toenails, toenails that are thickened or discoloured, or cracked heels. If you notice any signs of soreness or redness tell your GP, practice nurse or district nurse.
- **Wash your feet daily** to help prevent any infections. Don't soak your feet because this will destroy the natural oils in your skin and increase the risk of damage. Dry them gently, taking care to dry between your toes.
- **Apply moisturising cream** to help keep your skin healthy, but don't put it between your toes as this can make the skin too moist and increase the risk of athlete's foot.
- **Make sure you cut your toenails regularly.** Cut them straight across and not too short. If you find reaching down difficult, try asking a family member for help, or find out if your local Age UK has a toenail cutting service or know of any in your area. (There may be a charge for this service.)

Footcare services

Regular foot checks are important to identify early any problems that affect foot sensation and balance, or cause foot pain. Foot pain can stop you getting out and about. It can cause you to change your walking pattern and increase your risk of stumbling. So don't ignore any foot problems, even if you think they're minor.

Tell your GP, practice nurse or district nurse about any foot pain or decreased sensation in your feet. They will assess your foot problems and, if you qualify for NHS treatment, your GP will be able to make a referral for you to see an NHS chiropodist.

Contact The Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists for details of local practitioners if you need to have private treatment. Call them on **020 7234 8620** or find them online at www.feetforlife.org





Useful contacts

Age UK

We provide advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

In Wales, contact

Age Cymru: 0800 169 65 65

www.agecymru.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact

Age NI: 0808 808 7575

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact

Age Scotland: 0845 125 9732

www.agescotland.org.uk

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