

ask the SPIN DOCTOR

Nick from Vancouver writes, “I think I’m guilty of ignoring my feet – I guess it’s a case of, ‘If I can’t feel them, they must be okay.’ At any rate, I have a friend who ended up with a pretty bad pressure sore on his heel, so I made up my mind to learn how to take better care of my feet. Can you offer any advice?” To answer this issue’s question, we turned to Bonnie Venables, Clinical Resource Nurse/Nurse Continence Advisor – Outpatients at GF Strong.

I’m glad you’ve realized that feet are body parts that warrant special care and even pampering if you’re a person with an SCI. Feet are vulnerable, and any small problems you ignore can quickly spiral into major problems.

The following guidelines assume that you’re able to inspect and care for your feet yourself. If that’s not the case, simply ensure your caregivers include the various steps in your daily regimen.

The first thing you need to do is to carefully wash, dry and inspect your feet daily. Find a time that works well, such as your bath or shower time. Wash them with warm water with mild, non-perfumed soap. Remember to always check water temperature before putting your feet in, and do not soak your feet. Once clean, dry them well—especially between the toes. Then inspect them. Look carefully for any red areas, cuts, swelling, blisters, rash, cracks, or signs of infection such as increased redness, pain, and drainage. Use a mirror for hard to see areas. Once you’re satisfied that there are no concerns, moisturize with non-perfumed lotion—this will keep your skin soft and supple. The only place you shouldn’t moisturize is between your toes.

If you do see any cuts or sores, treat them immediately, even if they appear to be minor or inconsequential. And naturally, if you notice any injury that is clearly not minor (increased swelling in your legs, cuts, blisters, bruises or pressure injuries) speak to your doctor, nurse or spinal cord injury team as soon as possible.

Once a week or as required, you should also use this washing and inspection time to cut your toenails. Please be careful—and ask for help if needed. To prevent ingrown toenails, cut your nails straight across, as opposed to rounding them as you would fingernails. Remember: nail clippers only, no scissors or sharp objects!

After you’ve washed, dried and inspected your feet, you should get them covered and protected (unless, of course, your next stop is your bed). Even indoors, appropriate socks and shoes are vital to keep your feet and toes safe from bangs, bruises, heat and cold—particularly if you can’t feel these things.

Pay attention to your socks, as good quality will help wick moisture and keep your feet dry. Socks should be made from natural fibres like cotton or wool. They should be



loose around the top and never leave marks on the legs. While it might be a fashion faux pas, wearing socks inside out can reduce marks and soreness caused from seams. If you’re prone to swelling, compression socks can help you keep your blood flowing. Put them

on in the morning and take them off before going to bed. Ensure they are fitted correctly, and follow directions for cleaning and replacement.

When it comes to shoes, it’s a good idea to get your feet measured and seek advice from your treating physiotherapist or occupational therapist before trying or buying shoes. Always wear shoes that offer good protection—you should always have footwear with a closed toe. Wearing one size larger to prevent pressure issues is best. Buy shoes late in the day as feet tend to swell. Remember that sizing can differ between styles and brands, so take nothing for granted and try on every pair of shoes before purchasing. Consider Velcro fasteners—so much easier to put on. A wide toe area and non-slip soles will also make your life easier. If your shoes are new, check your skin more frequently for redness. Shake out your shoes before putting them on—that pebble that you can’t feel could do a lot of damage if left in place for a day.

Throughout your day, be vigilant to protect your feet from hot surfaces and burns. Heaters, hot concrete, hot metal foot plates are all hazards. Do not use hot water bottles, electric blankets, space heaters or heating pads on your legs or feet, as these may cause burns.

Finally, we suggest that you see a podiatrist or foot care nurse regularly—they’ve been trained to quickly identify any problems that may not be obvious to you. If you have any history of diabetes, this is doubly important.

With a little vigilance and by acquiring some daily good habits, you can have happy feet—and keep them in a state of bliss.

