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Answers to Frequently Asked Questions On Feet And Podiatric Medicine

1. Are foot problems widespread?

Seventy-five percent of Americans will experience foot health problems of varying degrees of severity at one time or another in their lives.

2. Are feet complicated?

The foot is an intricate structure containing 26 bones. Thirty-three joints, 107 ligaments, 19 muscles, and tendons hold the structure together and allow it to move in a variety of ways.

3. Are there a lot of bones in feet?

The 52 bones in your feet make up about one quarter of all the bones in your body.

4. Do more women have foot problems than men?

Women have about four times as many foot problems as men; lifelong patterns of wearing high heels often are the culprit.

5. How far does the average person walk during a typical day and during their lifetime?

The American Podiatric Medical Association says the average person takes 8,000 to 10,000 steps a day. Those cover several miles, and they all add up to about 115,000 miles in a lifetime -- more than four times the circumference of the globe.

6. How much pressure goes into your foot while you are walking?

There are times when you're walking that the pressure on your feet exceeds your body weight, and when you're running, it can be three or four times your weight.

7. What tips should I follow when shopping for shoes?

Shopping for shoes is best done in the afternoon, says the American Podiatric Medical Association. Your feet tend to swell a little during the day, and it's best to buy shoes to fit them then. Have your feet measured every time you purchase shoes, and do it while you're standing. When you try on shoes, try them on both feet; many people have one foot larger than the other, and it's best to fit the larger one.

8. How should toenails be trimmed?

Trim your toenails straight across with clippers specially designed for the purpose. Leave them slightly longer than the tips of your toes.

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9. What exercise is safe for your feet and good for your overall health?

Walking is the best exercise for your feet. It also contributes to your general health by improving circulation, contributing to weight control and promoting all-around well being.

10. Can serious medical problems first show up in the feet?

Your feet mirror your general health. Such conditions as arthritis, diabetes, nerve and circulatory disorders can show their initial symptoms in the feet -- so foot ailments can be your first sign of more serious medical problems.

11. How many podiatrists practice in the United States?

There are about 13,320 doctors of podiatric medicine actively in practice in the United States. There is an average of one podiatric physician for every 20,408 people and they receive more than 60 million visits a year from people with any number of foot ailments.

Yet that's probably only a fraction of the number of foot problems. Mostly, say podiatrists, that's because many people have the erroneous notion that their feet are supposed to hurt.

13. Are all foot problems hereditary? Are you born with foot problems or do they develop later?

Only a small percentage of the population is born with foot problems, the American Podiatric Medical Association believes. It's neglect, and a lack of awareness of proper care -- including ill-fitting shoes -- that bring on the problems. A lifetime of wear and tear, plus neglect, accounts for the fact that the practices of most podiatrists are made up of older Americans.

14. What are corns and calluses?

Corns and calluses are caused by friction and pressure from skin rubbing against bony areas when wearing shoes. If the first signs of soreness are ignored, corns and calluses rise up as nature's way of protecting sensitive areas.

15. How much sweat do your feet produce each day?

There are approximately 250,000 sweat glands in a pair of feet, and they excrete as much as half a pint of moisture each day.

16. What are plantar warts?

Plantar warts are caused by a virus which may invade the sole of the foot through cuts and breaks in the skin. Walking barefoot on dirty pavements or littered ground can expose feet to this sometimes painful skin infection.

17. What education is involved in becoming a podiatrist?

The podiatric physician (doctor of podiatric medicine, or DPM) is the health care professional trained in the care of your feet. He or she receives conventional medical training, plus special training on the foot, ankle, and lower leg. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico require that they pass rigorous state board examinations before they are licensed, and most require continuing education programs for regular license renewal.

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The seven colleges of podiatric medicine all have entrance requirements which, like institutions granting MD (medical doctor) and DO (doctor of osteopathy) degrees, anticipate completion of an undergraduate degree, though they will consider candidates who show unusual promise and have completed a minimum of 90 semester hours at accredited undergraduate colleges or universities. However, the colleges report that recent entering classes were, on the average, almost as likely to have more than four years of undergraduate/graduate work as less than four.

18. Are foot problems widespread?

About 19 percent of the US population has an average of 1.4 foot problems each year.

19. Do many people have athlete's foot or other foot infections?

About 5 percent of the US population has foot infections, including athlete's foot, other fungal infections, and warts each year.

20. Do many people have ingrown toenails?

About 5 percent of the US population has ingrown toenails or other toenail problems each year.

21. Are corns and calluses common?

About 5 percent of the US population has corns or calluses each year. Of the three major types of foot problems (infections, toenails, and corns and calluses), people are less likely to receive treatment for corns and calluses and more likely to continue to have corns and calluses as a problem without treatment.

22. Do many people suffer from fallen arches or injuries to their feet?

About 6 percent of the US population has foot injuries, bunions, and flat feet or fallen arches each year.

23. What are the most frequently occurring foot problems?

About 60 percent of all foot and ankle injuries, reported by the US population older than 17, were sprains and strains of the ankle.

24. Does income affect foot health?

As a person's income increases, the prevalence of foot problems decreases.

25. Do podiatrists treat the largest percentage of the population that require foot health care services?

Podiatric physicians are the major providers of foot care services, providing 39 percent of all foot care (orthopedic physicians provide 13 percent of all foot care, all other physicians provide 37 percent of all foot care, and physical therapists and others provide 11 percent of all foot care).

26. Is it more expensive to be treated by a podiatrist?

Podiatric physicians are four times less likely to use costly inpatient services than other physicians.

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27. How would you further describe the treatment and care provided by podiatrists?

Podiatric physicians provide treatment for 82 percent of corn and callus problems, 65 percent of toenail problems, 63 percent of bunion problems, 46 percent of flat feet or fallen arches problems, and 43 percent of toe/joint deformities.

Patients with foot problems visit podiatric physicians an average of 3.7 times a year, orthopedic physicians 3.4, osteopathic physicians 3.2, all other physicians 3.0, and physical therapists and others 7.1.

28. Do more people visit podiatrists as they get older?

As people age, they increasingly choose podiatric physicians. Medicare data verifies that podiatric physicians are the physicians of choice for 83 percent of hammertoe surgery, 67 percent of metatarsal surgery, 77 percent of bunionectomy surgery, and 47 percent of rearfoot surgery. *Medical Economics* magazine reported that 56 percent of all older patients have seen a podiatric physician.

29. How many people see a podiatric physician each year?

About 5 percent of the US population sees a podiatric physician each year. There were more than 55 million patient visits in 1995 from about 14 million people.

In 1998, the average number of yearly patient contacts with a podiatric physician was 4,488.

30. Are podiatrists on the staffs of many hospitals?

About 81 percent of all US hospitals have podiatric physicians on staff. The larger the hospital, the more likely it is to have podiatric physicians on its staff.

31. Are podiatrists affiliated with many managed care organizations?

About 87 percent of podiatric physicians are affiliated with preferred provider organizations, 52 percent with nursing homes, 81 percent with health maintenance organizations, 21 percent with academic institutions, and 12 percent with insurance companies, utilization review firms, or peer review organizations.

32. How many podiatric physicians graduate each year?

Over the past 10 years, an average of 592 new podiatric physicians graduated yearly from the 7 podiatric medical colleges.

33. Are the majority of podiatrists additionally qualified by board certification?

In 1998, 53 percent of all active podiatric physicians were certified by one or more recognized podiatric medical boards.

34. How old is the average podiatrist?

On average, the podiatric physician in the United States is 42 years old and has been in practice 13 years.

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35. Are there many women practicing podiatric medicine?

Over 14 percent of podiatric physicians are female.

36. Are most podiatric physicians in group or solo practice?

About 58 percent of podiatric physicians are in solo practice. They have an average of 3 employees.

37. Are podiatrists usually licensed in more than one state?

About 48 percent of podiatric physicians have a license in 1 state, 31 percent in 2, 19 percent in 3, and 2 percent in 4 states

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