

Summer weather can do a number on your feet, but there are a number of steps you can take to ...

Help your feet BEAT THE HEAT

Tips for happy tootsies

During the warm weather, our feet are more exposed and more vulnerable to irritation and injury. Dr. Jane Anderson, a podiatrist on the staff of Durham Regional Hospital, part of Duke University Health System, says the most common foot problem during summer is dry, cracked heels caused by wearing sandals, and she cautions against some styles.

"Avoid sandals with thongs between the toes, like a flip-flop. They can cause a lot of problems with blisters, corns and callouses."

Anderson says to measure your foot whenever you buy shoes. Make sure the toe box is round enough and wide enough not to squeeze. Persons with diabetes should be especially careful in the summer, due to peripheral neuropathy, or loss of sensation in their feet, which means they might not notice a cut or crack in the skin.

And take good care of your hot, aching feet: "Sometimes a nice soak in cool water with a little Epsom salts or a massage is helpful."

By MARIA SONNENBERG
Gannett News Service

We may floss our teeth and check our eyesight regularly, but feet usually don't get much preventive maintenance, beyond a perfunctory wash between the toes.

With summer weather, the feet get an ever-greater bombardment of possible infections and maladies.

Sweat, for example, can do a number on your feet.

"During athletic activities, a foot can sweat as much as a pint a day," says Dr. Robert Tinsley, a podiatrist in Viera, Fla. "Washing between the toes every day can prevent chronic infections."

With the right pair of socks, the moisture shouldn't be a problem. But slip on cotton socks, however, and you could be headed down the slippery slope of fungi and blisters.

"Cotton socks are no longer recommended for sports," Tinsley says. "They lose their shape and develop little bows that keep moisture against the skin that increases the formation of blisters."

Better to select a pair of socks designed specifically for your exercise of choice.

"You want a low absorption factor that wicks water away to the outer shell, something like acrylic microfiber," Tinsley says.

Some pairs are manufactured with right and left socks for an even better fit.

With shoes, more expensive is not necessarily better. Many times, Tinsley has steered patients to big-box discounters to select inexpensive, well-fitting shoes.

"You can buy comfortable shoes without spending too much," he says.

That's particularly easy on the pockets of people with different-sized feet, who

must buy two different sizes of the identical shoes.

Of course, if you have the money, investing in footwear such as the Masai Barefoot Technology line or the Z-Coil can be an investment in happy walking. "They can be very comfortable," Tinsley says.

Don't expect a podiatrist to advocate the ridiculously high heels and narrow-toed shoes many women crave. "Anything over an inch of heel is not good," Tinsley says.

If the shoe fits, wear it, but don't wear it every day. "Try to change shoes every other day to prevent tinea, a chronic infection of the skin, Tinsley says. "That's even more important in the summer, when the perspiration from the legs runs down into the shoes."

Tinsley suggests patients purchase shoes at the end of the day. "There's a certain amount of swelling in everyone's feet by the end of the day, and you want to get the right fit," he says. "If you think you can stretch a shoe, you might, but you're going to get a lot of irritation in the process."

Wearing sandals or going barefoot make the foot more prone to picking up viral infections, so sandal fans should maintain good foot hygiene.

Diabetics should stay away from sandals. "If you've had a medical condition like diabetes, you're likely to develop loss of protective sensation on your feet," Tinsley says.

The condition, known as LOPS, means the patient no longer can feel painful stimuli on the feet. "They are more subject to injury without knowing it," Tinsley says.

For kids as well as adults, summer often is barefoot-intensive weather. Just keep the feet clean, and you should be OK.