Diabetes affects your feet in 2 major ways. First, elevated blood sugars can decrease blood flow to the feet and legs (otherwise known as Peripheral Arterial Disease). Blood flow to the feet is integral to wound healing and your body's ability to fight infection. Second, chronic elevated blood sugars can lead to Peripheral Neuropathy. This manifests itself in tingling, pain, burning, numbness and weakness of the feet. The numbness can become so severe, that you could step on a nail and not feel it! Now try to imagine a scenario where you sustain an injury to the foot with compromised circulation and lack of sensation. This injury can very quickly lead to infection, ulceration (sore) and ultimately amputation if left untreated.

According to the American Diabetes Association (ADA), there are approximately 14 million people in the US with diabetes. Of these, 15% may develop foot ulcerations (open wound/sores). Greater than 60% of non-traumatic amputations occur in people with diabetes. The rate of amputation is 10 times higher in the diabetic population versus non-diabetics. The three-year survival rate of a diabetic patient after amputation is 50%.

With statistics like these, one can easily be overwhelmed with fear. That is not the reason why these are reported to you. The silver lining is that most, if not all complications related to diabetes and your feet are preventable with good common sense foot care, and control of your blood sugar.

The key to diabetic foot care is prevention. The following list is a compilation of preventative measures that you can take to help prevent injury to the foot. The large majority of diabetic patients live their entire lives with very few, if any, ramifications of diabetes because of the following preventative measures:

- Keep blood sugar as close to normal as possible as measured by Hemoglobin A1c. This is the most effective way to decrease vascular and neurological complications that can lead to amputation.
- Inspect your feet daily. Know what “your normal” looks like, and if anything looks abnormal – contact your doctor.
- Make sure your healthcare provider checks your feet at least once a year. Take your shoes and socks off at your physical exam.
- Every diabetic should see a Podiatrist at least once a year.
- Inform your Podiatrist if any problems arise. Do not wait for your next appointment.
- Toenails should be trimmed straight across and filed on a regular basis. If you have difficulty trimming your nails, it should be performed by a Podiatrist.
- Corns and Calluses MUST be trimmed by a Podiatrist. You should not attempt to trim your own corns and calluses. In my practice, corns and calluses are, by far, the most common areas that we see ulcerations form.
- To improve circulation, be more active. If you cannot be more active, try to elevate feet whenever at rest. Wiggle your toes and move your ankles up and down for at least 5 minutes, at least 2-3 times per day. Regular exercise, such as walking, can improve circulation and reduce blood sugar.
- Some Medicare patients may qualify for the Medicare Diabetic Shoe Program, where one pair of shoes with 3 sets of insoles per year is provided to patients with diabetes. Many diabetics qualify for this program. Ask your Podiatrist if you qualify.
- Wash your feet daily and be sure to dry in between your toes.
- NEVER WALK BAREFOOT and check the inside of your shoes for small objects before putting them on.
- Keep your skin moisturized daily. Apply cream to feet and legs, but NEVER apply between toes unless advised by your Podiatrist or Physician.
- Protect your feet from hot and cold temperatures, such as the sand on the beach and hot pavement. Test water temperature with the inside of your wrist or elbow prior to bathing to prevent scalding.

This list may seem overwhelming, but most of the recommendations are common sense if you're thinking from a standpoint of protecting your feet. If you follow these basic guidelines and see a Podiatrist at least once a year, you can and will significantly decrease your chances of suffering from foot complications due to diabetes.

Peter Kasjianski, DPM, FACFAS, treats patients with diabetes and other foot ailments at Granite State Podiatry Associates, 424 Hanover Street, Manchester, 603-668-3509.

Podiatry clinics will be offered at Elliot Senior Health Primary Care starting in September. Call 663-7030 for information.