



Diabetic Foot Ulcers

An open sore on the foot in a person living with diabetes

What is a diabetic foot ulcer?

A diabetic foot ulcer is an open sore or wound on the foot. It most often shows up on the bottom of the foot, on the ball of the foot, on the heel, or on a toe. About one in four people with diabetes will get a foot ulcer at some point.

These wounds matter. Left alone, they can get infected, reach the bone, and lead to losing part of the foot or leg. The good news: when they are caught early and cared for correctly, most of them heal.

Why does it happen?

Three problems usually come together:

- **Nerve damage (neuropathy).** High blood sugar over time damages the nerves in the feet. You may not feel a blister, a pebble in your shoe, or a hot spot. The injury keeps going because nothing hurts.
- **Poor blood flow.** Diabetes narrows and stiffens the small blood vessels in the legs and feet. Less blood means less oxygen and fewer healing cells reaching the wound.
- **Pressure.** Walking puts your whole body weight on a small area of skin. Where nerve damage has changed the shape of the foot, pressure builds in one spot until the skin breaks down.

High blood sugar also slows down the immune system, so infection sets in more easily and spreads faster.

What you may notice

- Drainage on your sock or in your shoe, sometimes with an odor
- A callus that turns dark, or has a black or red spot inside it
- Swelling, redness, or warmth in one part of the foot
- An open sore, often with thick skin built up around the edge
- Little or no pain, even when the wound looks serious

Pain is not a reliable warning sign here. Many diabetic foot ulcers do not hurt at all. Look at your feet instead of waiting to feel something.



How we treat it

- **Taking pressure off the wound (offloading).** This is the single most important step. That may mean a special boot, a total contact cast, a surgical shoe, a custom insole, or crutches or a wheelchair for a while.
- **Debridement.** We remove dead tissue and the thick callus around the edge. Healthy tissue cannot grow across dead tissue. This is usually done in your home and is not usually painful.
- **The right dressing.** Wounds heal best in a moist, protected environment. We choose a dressing based on how much fluid your wound makes and change it as the wound changes.
- **Checking blood flow.** We check the pulses in your feet and may order simple, painless circulation testing. If blood flow is poor, healing will stall until that is treated.
- **Treating infection.** If there are signs of infection we obtain cultures and start the right antibiotic, and we look for signs the bone is involved.
- **Working on blood sugar.** We coordinate with your primary care provider or endocrinologist. Blood sugar control is part of wound care, not separate from it.

What you can do at home

- Look at both feet every single day, including between the toes and the bottoms. Use a mirror on the floor or ask someone to look for you.
- Never walk barefoot, even indoors, even for a short trip to the bathroom.
- Shake out your shoes before putting them on and feel inside with your hand.
- Wash your feet daily in warm water. Test the water with your elbow or a thermometer, not your foot.
- Dry carefully between the toes. Put lotion on the tops and bottoms of your feet but not between the toes.
- Do not cut calluses or corns yourself, and do not use over-the-counter corn removers or medicated pads.
- Wear the offloading device we give you every time you stand up. Even a few unprotected steps a day can undo weeks of healing.
- Do not smoke. Nicotine narrows the vessels that carry blood to your wound.



When to call us right away

- New or increasing redness, swelling, warmth, or pain around the wound
- Drainage that becomes thick, cloudy, green or foul-smelling
- A red streak spreading up the foot or leg
- Fever, chills, or feeling generally unwell
- Blood sugars running unusually high for no clear reason
- The wound getting larger or deeper, or a new sore anywhere on either foot
- Any black tissue that was not there before