

Attention to the feet

DIABETICS are highly prone to foot complications due to diabetic neuropathy, which is nerve damage that can cause numbness of the feet.

According to Dr Harikrishna K. R. Nair, head of the Wound Care Unit at the Department of Medicine, Hospital Kuala Lumpur, approximately 1.5 million diabetics suffer from foot complications yearly, and in many cases, their infected wounds are left untreated. In fact, diabetic foot ulcers are the most common foot wound among Malaysians.

Dr Nair explains that there are three types of nerve damage: sensory, autonomic and motor neuropathy.

"Sensory neuropathy is characterised by numbness of the feet or insensate feet or abnormal sensations such as pins and needles, autonomic neuropathy is characterised by dryness of skin, which can lead to cracks, while motor neuropathy involves the gradual weakening of muscles that eventually waste away.

"Muscle atrophy can increase pressure on the skin, causing it to break and form a wound," he says.

Besides that, the compromised immune systems of diabetics can make them more susceptible to infection and vascular abnormalities can interrupt blood supply to the feet as blood vessels are damaged.

These patients can be helped as long as the infected wound does not develop into gangrene, after which point not much can be done to save the affected area – the foot or part of it has to be amputated. This calls for greater caution and care among those living with diabetes.

"Diabetics must ensure their feet are always clean, wear proper footwear, and tend to any wound immediately to prevent infection. Wounds must be thoroughly



Diabetics should perform regular foot checks to quickly identify abnormalities.

assessed, cleaned and dressed," says Dr Nair.

Regularly checking the feet will also allow diabetics to identify any cuts or abnormalities as soon as possible, even though they may not be able to feel those injuries. Dr Nair recommends using a mirror to check the bottom of the feet, too.

Diabetic wounds are easily infected, especially if the patient is also experiencing renal failure as it restricts blood supply to the feet.

However, Dr Nair explains that this situation can be managed with greater vigilance and constant management of blood sugar levels.

"Eighty-five percent of all diabetic foot wounds can be prevented with yearly foot check-ups at the hospital or health centres as well as regular monitoring by diabetics themselves," he says.

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