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THE ROOT OF COMMON FOOT PROBLEMS

Environment vs. Genetics

BY PEDRAM HENDIZADEH, D.P.M., F.AC.F.A.S.

Small cracks can allow germs and bacteria to enter your feet and cause skin infections known as cellulitis

Is it what's on the inside or what's on the outside that counts? This is an age-old question with a patented, politically correct answer. But, in the case of feet – it may not be as clear. Is it your Manolos (footwear) or is it your old Grandma Rose (genetics)?

Have you ever had painful corns, calluses, hammertoes, bunions, fungus, heel pain, or ingrown toenails? Have you ever asked yourself, "Are all my foot woes caused by my shoes?" There are many different types of foot problems that occur for a multitude of reasons, many of which are multi-factorial. Here is a brief list of some of the more common foot ailments and their causes.

Hammertoes. This is a condition where one or both joints of the second, third, fourth, or fifth toes (the "little toes") bend. The abnormal bending is caused by an imbalance between the flexor and the extensor tendons of the toes. This imbalance is typically caused by ill-fitting or high-heeled shoes. However, genetics can play a role. High arches or



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flat feet both can increase the risk of developing hammer-toes.

Corns. A corn is a circular, thickened area in the skin of the foot that usually forms after repeated pressure on the skin, such as the rubbing of an ill-fitted shoe. Sorry ladies and gents, this is caused by foot wear. You can't blame Grandma Rose for this one; but, you can blame Jimmy or Mr. Blahnik. In fact, in some third world countries where people don't generally wear shoes, this problem is extremely rare. However, other foot conditions can contribute to the problem, such as hammertoes, where the tops of the bent toes tend to rub against the tops of shoes.

Bunions. This is a condition where the big toe points toward the second toe, causing a bump on the inside edge of the toe. This bump is an enlargement of bone or tissue around the joint at the base of the big toe. Bunions tend to occur more often in women and can sometimes run in families. They are generally caused by bone structure and ligamentous laxity, or "loose ligaments." However, narrow-toed, high-heeled shoes can certainly aggravate the problem. The condition can progress and become quite painful. On the other hand, sometimes bunions are not bothersome at all, and are simply a cosmetic issue.

Ingrown toenails. This condition occurs when the rim of the nail grows down into the skin of the toe. Genetics do play a small part in this. However, research shows that activity or shoes are the main culprits. Ingrown toenails occur most often in young athletes and in those that squeeze their feet into shoes that are one size too small. Nail salons that give pedicures can also aggravate this problem when they attempt to dig the ingrown nail out. This can cause irritation

or an infection and is clearly not recommended. Additionally, make sure your nail salon uses only sterilized instruments, especially considering the next common foot problem.

Fungus. The origins of this infection are completely from the environment and are caused by microscopic organisms (fungi) that can live on the skin. The more exposure, the more likely a skin or nail infection will develop. Fungus is ubiquitous – not to sound like a horror movie, but it is everywhere. However, it is usually picked up at the gym, hotel, locker room, or nail salon, where the warm, damp environments may breed higher concentrations of fungi.

Regardless of the root of the problem (genetic or environmental), there are some things you can do to reduce the risk of these female foot issues:

1. Wear comfortable shoes. Shoes that have a bit more support are preferred. Heels are okay, as long as they are not too high and worn on occasion.
2. Let the feet and nails breathe – do not wear nail polish 24/7, year-round. Fungus breeds in a dark environment. If the nails are covered by nail polish, the fungus can actually breed under the nail polish and develop something called White Superficial Onychomycosis. This looks like powdered sugar on your nails.
3. Have feet checked regularly. If any calluses, corns, bruises, or areas of irritation appear, it should be taken care of sooner rather than later. These problems arise because the body is telling you something is wrong.
4. Once-a-week self examination is recommended to check

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21ST CENTURY

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For those patients who need more extensive treatment like crowns, bridges or implants, computer advancements have allowed us to design and manufacture crowns digitally. This provides a much better fit than previously available. Moulds of the teeth can sometimes be eliminated altogether, and a scanned image of the teeth is used instead to create the digital model that the crown is designed on. Crowns can now sometimes be made in one visit.

OTHER TECHNOLOGIES

These other technologies are used routinely in the modern dental office for comfort as well as education for our patients.

- Video patient education - short presentations that describe almost

any procedures that a patient may need are shown on a monitor chair-side, so a patient can better understand what will be done.

- Digital intra-oral cameras - We can instantly take a picture of your tooth and show it on the computer monitor, so you can see what we see. The old saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" is absolutely true!

- Personal entertainment - iPods™, Satellite, or internet radio can provide each patient with their own personal music choice to listen to while they are treated. A MyVu™ personal media viewer is my favorite new way to allow a patient to relax and forget about what we are doing. This device is like a pair of sunglasses that is plugged in to a source like a DVD player and allows you to watch a movie and see it no matter where the doctor needs you to position your head. This is great for longer procedures.

These are just some of the ways dentistry has advanced and made it better, safer, greener, and much more comfortable. Painless dentistry does exist!

IMAGE

FOOT PROBLEMS

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for cracks on the bottom of the heels. Pay particular attention to the skin between the toes. Using moisturizing cream can help prevent cracks, particularly in the winter time. Your skin is a barrier to microbes. Small cracks can allow germs and bacteria to enter your feet and cause skin infections known as cellulitis.

5. If copious sweating is a major issue, consider tea soaks. Dilute caffeinated tea and soak for 15 minutes, twice a day. The caffeine and the tannic acid in the tea help constrict the sweat glands.

So, perhaps the answer to the question is both; foot wear and genetics both play roles in the development of many female foot issues. If you have bad genetics stacked against you, then you need be extra careful. For more information regarding these and other foot issues visit these sites: www.GreatFootCare.com, www.LI-Footcare.com, or www.APMA.org.

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