

How to Prevent Gangrene

Expert
Reviewed

Four Parts: [Taking Care of Your Feet](#) [Protecting Your Feet](#) [Leading a Healthier Lifestyle With Diabetes](#) [Quitting Smoking](#)

Gangrene is when tissue dies off because of a lack of blood flow or due to an infection. You can get gangrene anywhere on your body, but you're particularly susceptible on your feet and sometimes your hands. If you end up with gangrene, serious action may need to be taken, starting with antibiotics and moving on to surgery and amputation.^[1] If you're diabetic, you're more likely to develop this condition, so you need to take extra precautions.

Part
1

Taking Care of Your Feet

1 Know the risk factors. There are a number of risk factors for gangrene, most of which can be avoided. They include:^[2]

- Smoking
- Obesity
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Diabetes
- Impaired immune function (from an autoimmune disease like HIV or treatment such as chemotherapy)
- Intravenous drug use
- Use of warfarin, an anticoagulant drug, though this is very rare. Using both warfarin and heparin together can increase your risk.

2 Do a daily foot check. If you're at risk for gangrene because of a condition such as diabetes, it's important to check your feet over every day for possible problems. If you have trouble looking at the bottom of your feet, have someone help you or use a mirror.^[3] Watch for the following symptoms:^[4]

- Discoloration, going from red to dark and black
- A clear line between healthy skin and affected skin
- A foul smell (for wet gangrene)
- A shiny appearance to the skin
- Coldness in the extremity
- Pain, followed by loss of sensation
- Loss of pulse in arteries

3 Wash your feet daily. Even if you don't shower every day, you should wash your feet in warm water (about 90 to 95°F or 32 to 35°C). Try not to soak your feet, as that can lead to dry skin. Instead, wash with gentle soap, then wash the soap away. Dry your feet thoroughly, including between your toes.^[5]

- When you have corns or callouses, be gentle. Don't use razor blades or chemical removers, as they can be too harsh on your skin. Instead, gently smooth them away after you bathe. An even better solution is getting a podiatrist to take care of the problem.^[6]
- After you wash, be sure to put on a good lotion. Keeping your feet moisturized can help prevent cracked heels and other types of cuts.
- Make sure to wash any cuts with soap and water to stave off infection. Keep them dry otherwise, and covered with sterile dressing.^[7]

4 Trim your toenails often. Trimming your toenails is important in preventing gangrene, as not trimming them can lead to ingrown toenails and cuts. Try to trim them at least once a week or when you notice they grow out longer. Your doctor or podiatrist can help if you can't do it yourself.^[8]

- Don't round toenails off like you do your nails. You should cut them straight across to prevent ingrown toenails.

- Smooth off the edges with a file.

5 Tap your feet. Throughout the day, get your blood moving to your feet by tapping your feet and wiggling your toes. More blood circulation means better healing when you do get cuts, so moving around can help prevent a bad infection from setting in.^[9]

6 Get a checkup. Make sure you are going in for your yearly checkups. Your doctor knows what to look for when it comes to gangrene, and she may catch something you miss. In addition, watching a doctor check your feet can help you know how to do it properly yourself.^[10]

Part 2 Protecting Your Feet

1 Put your shoes on. It can be tempting to run outside for a minute without your shoes; however, even a small dash outside can lead to a cut you don't feel, which in turn could eventually lead to gangrene. Putting your shoes on to protect your feet is an important part of maintaining foot health.^[11]

- It can also be a good idea to wear slippers around the house, so you don't stub your toe or step on something you shouldn't.
- In fact, some doctors recommend wearing socks and shoes at all times, even indoors, to protect your feet.^[12]
- Also, put socks on. Wearing shoes without socks can lead to a number of abrasions or cuts, as well as blisters. If you're diabetic, cuts may not heal as easily, which in turn could lead to gangrene. Always wear socks with your shoes to help protect your feet from problems.^[13]

2 Wear good shoes. When picking out shoes, make sure they fit properly. Walk around in them a bit to make sure they are comfortable everywhere. In addition, make sure you have room to wriggle your toes. You don't want anything too narrow that will squeeze them.^[14]

- It's best to shop at night rather than in the morning, because your feet swell during the day.
- If you can get away with it, athletic shoes are the best option because they provide the most support and comfort. Skip anything that leaves your foot exposed, as you could damage your foot.
- Also, don't break in shoes all at once. Wear them for a couple of hours each day, so you don't end up with a blister.

3 Stay away from temperature extremes. If you have nerve damage in your feet, it's easy to damage them with extreme temperatures. Therefore, you should keep your feet away from heat sources such as hot pavement, beaches, and radiators, and wear sunscreen on your feet if they are exposed. Also, try to skip extreme colds, such as ice packs, and keep your feet warm in the winter with socks at night and during the day.^[15]

Part 3 Leading a Healthier Lifestyle With Diabetes

1 Manage your diabetes. Diabetes is one of the main diseases that can lead to gangrene. If your diabetes is out of control, you likely have too much sugar or glucose in your blood. That, in turn, can lead to nerve damage and low blood flow. Nerve damage means you don't have as much sensation in your feet, and cuts can go unnoticed, which in turn, can lead to gangrene.^[16]

2 Eat healthily. One way to help manage your diabetes is through diet. As a diabetic, you have to eat a good balance of protein, fruits and vegetables, and healthy carbohydrates. You need enough carbohydrates and protein to keep your blood sugar up, while not eating so many that your blood sugar gets too high.^[17]

- One way to focus on healthy eating is to divide your plate. A quarter of it should be devoted to healthy whole grains, such as brown rice or whole wheat bread. Another quarter should be a healthy protein, such as fish or chicken.
- The other half should be taken up with fruits and vegetables.
- Also, try to replace any sugary drinks, such as juice or soda, with water or unsweetened tea.
- Talking to a nutritionist to help you set up a healthy eating plan.

3 Exercise more. Exercising more can also help you stay healthy and manage your diabetes. You should be exercising at least three times a week. If you haven't been exercising much, start small, such as taking a 10 minute walk each time, and then work up to longer.^[18]

- When picking out exercises, try to choose ones that are easy on your feet. For instance, walking is pretty easy on your feet, as is swimming and bicycling.
- Exercises that require you to run or jump are much harder on your feet.^[19]

4 Check your blood sugar as needed. Checking your blood sugar can help you manage your diabetes. It can tell you when you may need to eat more at certain meals, as well as when your blood sugar is getting too high, and you need to eat less.^[20]

- Your doctor will let you know how many times a day you need to check your blood sugar.
- For example, if your blood sugars are particularly unstable, you may need to check them before every meal, as well as one to two hours after every meal to see how it fluctuates throughout the day, as well as bedtime. If you are more stable, you may be able to check it only twice a day.

5 Talk to your doctor. If you are having trouble managing your diabetes at home, don't be afraid to talk to your doctor. He may need to put you on a different medication to help you better manage your diabetes, or they may even need to start you on insulin.^[21]

6 Cut back on alcohol. Alcohol can make your diabetes worse. In addition, it can raise your blood pressure and your cholesterol, which can increase your chances of developing gangrene. Therefore, it's best to try to cut down on your alcohol intake.^[22]

- Men should limit themselves to one to two drinks a day, while women should stick with one or less.
- One drink is a single beer (12 ounces), a glass of wine (5 ounces), or one shot of hard liquor (1.5 ounces).^[23]

Part 4 4 Quitting Smoking

1 Make your health your reason to quit. Before you quit, it's important to make sure you know the reason you want to quit.^[24] Smoking can increase your likelihood of developing gangrene, so that can be a good motivator for wanting to quit.^[25]

- Smoking worsens the effects of nerve damage. It can lead to smaller blood vessels that aren't as flexible, which means your feet aren't getting as much blood.
- When you have a wound, blood flow helps heal the wound. Therefore, smoking can slow down the healing process, which in turn can lead to gangrene.

2 Call the Quit hotline. The national Quit hotline is 1-800-QUITNOW or 1-800-784-8669. When you call the hotline, you'll be put in touch with someone who can get you started with quitting. They can also put you in contact with local resources that can help you quit.^[26]

3 Combat your cravings by knowing your triggers. Often, people will smoke at a certain time of day, with certain people, or during a certain activity. If you know what will trigger you to smoke, you can start combating them by having a plan of action in place.^[27]

- For instance, if you like to smoke after dinner, take the family for a walk instead.
- If you're a fan of smoking and playing pool, you might need to stop playing pool for a bit.

4 Try a nicotine replacement. Nicotine replacements include patches, tablets, inhalers, gum, and several other options. They give you a dose of nicotine to help you deal with the cravings, and they can help you deal with the withdrawal symptoms. Since nicotine is the addictive part of cigarettes, getting smaller doses of that particular drug can help you quit.^[28]

5 Ask for help. If your friends and family know you want to quit, they can help you to do it. For instance, if they see you wanting to light up, they can discourage you to stop. If one of them smokes, they can quit asking you if you want one, too, when they light up. They can also help you deal with some of the other symptoms of withdrawal, such as depression and anxiety, by being there when you need to talk.^[29]

- Often, you will taper off of these much like you might taper off of cigarettes. For instance, you may take half a dose after two weeks of being on them.

Community Q&A

My leg is swollen down to my toes. How long should I wait to see a doctor?



Swelling can be fairly serious, so you should go see a doctor right away.

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Sources and Citations

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3. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Gangrene/Pages/Prevention.aspx>

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