

# Diabetic skin care

By Dr. Benjamin Barankin

People with diabetes need to be vigilant when it comes to skin care because they have a higher risk of developing skin conditions such as dry skin, ulcers and infection. Diabetes reduces nerve sensitivity and causes circulation problems, making it more difficult to identify other health problems.

## How diabetes affects the skin

High blood glucose causes fluid loss in the body, leading to dry, cracking skin. This then allows germs into the body, causing infections.

For example, when people with diabetes get a blister from new or ill-fitting shoes, they might not feel the pain because of nerve damage and can therefore neglect to treat the blister. Lack of treatment leads to an infection, and the high blood glucose levels feed the germs. Finally, poor blood flow to the legs and feet slows healing.

## Watch for the following conditions

If you have diabetes, you must be especially alert for the following conditions.

- **Necrobiosis lipoidica diabetorum** is a patch of hardened, shiny skin that is usually found on the shins and appears gradually over several weeks. This patch of plaque might be yellow–brown to purple in colour and will have a pronounced border. It is more often associated with type 1 than type 2 diabetes and often heals, leaving a scar.

- **Diabetic dermopathy** (or shin spots) appears as smaller, round lesions with raised edges.
- **Bullosis diabetorum** are nodules, like blisters, under the skin. They can rupture. The cause is unknown.
- **Acanthosis nigricans** causes brown/black lesions on the skin and is more common among Hispanics and African Americans.

## Taking care

People with diabetes can take a number of preventative measures to maintain the health of their skin.

**Humidity:** Having a cool-air humidifier in your bedroom can be particularly helpful since it can put 40–50 per cent moisture back into the air.

**Bathing:** If you are dirty or sweaty, consider using a moisturizing soap. If you are showering or bathing to wake-up or relax, however, then use a milder cleanser instead of soap. Adding bath oil can also be moisturizing. Make sure the water is not scalding hot. After your shower, pat dry your skin (rather than rubbing) and apply a moisturizer within three minutes.

**Moisturizer selection:** Moisturizers containing urea and ceramides are particularly effective.

**Check your feet:** Inspect your feet every day for cuts, blisters, sores, swelling, redness and sore toenails.

**Socks before underwear:** If you put on your underwear first then your toes will touch the underwear. This brings any fungus from your feet into the groin area, resulting in “jock itch.” Putting your socks on first prevents this.

**Itchy skin:** Diabetic skin is prone to dryness and eczema (itchy, often red skin). Scratching can result in cuts to the skin, which are entry points for infection. Your doctor can recommend a cream to stop the itching.

**The elements:** Make sure to protect your skin from excessive sun or wind, which can be damaging and dehydrating to the skin.

**Squeeze and lift:** Leg swelling or lower-leg discoloration (venous stasis dermatitis) indicates the presence of the circulation problems that many people with diabetes eventually develop. Keep your legs elevated when resting and talk to your doctor about compression socks or stockings.

Keeping an eye on your skin and speaking to your doctor about any concerns are the best preventative measures for healthy skin. **CS**

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