

WHAT ARE THE 10 MOST IMPORTANT WAYS TO CARE FOR YOUR LEGS?

The legs are one of the most overlooked areas when it comes to thinking about our health. Leg conditions are still one of the biggest health crises we face in the UK. This can be attributed to a general lack of awareness of the signs and symptoms of leg conditions and the inadequate processes for early detection.[1]

Why is caring for your legs important?

Leg pain, wounds, and other chronic lower limb conditions are regularly misidentified and mismanaged.[2] This often results in an ineffective use of resources and inadequate treatment that can lead to unnecessary patient harm. Undue harm can have a considerable impact on a patient's quality of life in the form of ongoing pain, non-healing wounds, depression and isolation.

Improperly managed leg conditions not only have unacceptable human implications, but also strain the increasingly limited resources of the NHS.



Studies reveal that a more productive and effective approach to leg conditions is needed to improve patient outcomes. A new approach should prioritise prevention, rather than delaying treatment until more chronic symptoms develop.[3]

This approach should include tackling the root causes of poor leg health, including chronic venous insufficiency (CVI) and arterial disease.

Looking after your legs is a long-term and collaborative effort between you, your GP, and wider healthcare services. Working together to care for the lower limbs can lead to a brighter future with healthier legs.

If you are experiencing any noticeable changes or discomfort in your legs, it is important to make an appointment with your GP. Prevention and early detection are the most effective forms of medical intervention

Check Your Legs Regularly

You know your legs better than anyone else. That is why knowing what to look for when you check your legs is so important.

Regularly checking your legs will allow you to observe any visible changes. This may allow you to correlate physical symptoms with any non-visible sensations you are feeling. These changes may include a difference in colour, shape or texture.

Report Any Usual Changes Or Issues

Early intervention is an essential part of any form of leg treatment.

Recognising the key indicators of leg problems will allow you to report any concerns to your GP before any symptoms worsen or develop into a more serious condition. This means keeping an eye on seemingly minor issues such as muscle cramping and varicose veins.

Skin Care

The importance of looking after the skin on your legs should not be underestimated.

Good leg hygiene will reduce the risk of infection, especially if you have any existing wounds.

Making sure that your skin is moisturised will prevent it from becoming dry, flaky, and itchy. These factors can lead to discomfort, but they also increase the chances of the skin breaking and developing a more serious wound. Fragrance-free emollients are generally recommended for leg care as they minimise the risk of irritation caused by scented ingredients.

Exercise

Exercise is a great way of improving circulation and lymphatic drainage in your legs.

The amount of exercise you should do depends on factors like your mobility and whether you have any pain. However, short walks and swimming are great ways to keep the blood flowing in your legs.

If you have any venous issues, your GP may recommend some light exercises for your feet and ankles that can help strengthen your leg muscles and improve your circulation.

Diet And Nutrition

A good diet is one of the key aspects of living a healthy life. It will ensure that your body and all its organs have adequate nutrients to function optimally. Maintaining a healthy diet may reduce your chances of developing conditions such as diabetes or blood clotting.

Lifestyle Changes

There are certain lifestyle changes that can make a huge difference to your general wellbeing, and have a positive knock-on effect on your legs. Maintaining a healthy weight is important, as it decreases your chances of developing conditions that affect your legs. Stopping smoking is the single best thing you can do for your health. Smoking negatively impacts the oxygen levels and blood flow in the body. Quitting smoking or trying to limit the number of cigarettes you smoke will alleviate some of the pressure in your circulatory system.

Compression Garments

By exerting pressure on the lower legs, compression garments encourage blood to flow upwards toward the heart. Your GP might advise you to wear compression garments (i.e., stockings) every day if you have a history of CVI or swelling in your legs. Compression garments can be a little uncomfortable when you first start wearing them. They should, however, begin to reduce any pain and swelling in the legs within a few days of use.

Comfortable Footwear

Comfortable footwear is sometimes overlooked. Wearing footwear that provides adequate support for the ankles and heels can help to cushion the impact of walking on your legs. Comfortable shoes can reduce your risk of friction and shearing. These forces can sometimes lead to injuries that may become chronic if you have any underlying conditions affecting your leg health.

Elevation

Swelling can be alleviated by elevating the legs, especially around the ankles, where fluid tends to accumulate the most.

Elevating your legs above your heart helps to improve circulation and lymphatic function.

Keeping your legs elevated as much as you can will help the blood flow back to the heart more easily. This will enable any fluid that is pooling in the legs to drain away.

Be Consistent

Making some lifestyle changes can go a long way in improving the health of your lower limbs.

Maintaining routines (i.e., wearing compression garments) can help to tackle some of the underlying causes of leg conditions and prevent the occurrence of wounds.

You may not see any immediate improvements with small lifestyle changes or actions, but being consistent will have some bigger, long-term benefits

References:

1. *Making Legs Matter, A Case for System Change and Transformation in Lower Limb Management. Consensus Document. Journal of Wound Care 2021; 30(11): 4*
2. *Guest JF, Ayoub N, McIlwraith T, Uchegebu I, Gerrish A, et al. Health Economics Burden that Different Wound Types Impose on UK's National Health Service. International Wound Journal 2017; 14(2): 322-330*
3. *Ibid: 322-300*

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