

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND?



WWW.PHOTOS.COM

Not so fast, local doctors say. Foot care should be just as much a priority in the winter as in the summer

BY ROB EARNSHAW
Times Correspondent

“Out of sight, out of mind,” said Dr. Michael Nirenberg of Friendly Foot Care in Crown Point. “People don’t realize how prone your feet are to infection.”

That’s why even though the weather has turned cold and the warm socks and boots have been slipped on, doctors say it’s just as important to take care of your feet at this time of year – even if no one will see them.

Nirenberg has just published a booklet, “MRSA and Your Feet: 12 Ways to Protect Your Feet and Your Family’s Feet.”

MRSA pronounced “mursa,” is methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, an infection that’s killed the elderly, babies, teenagers and athletes and lately has been responsible for closing public schools.

“People don’t realize how easily MRSA can enter feet,” Nirenberg said. “Preventing MRSA infections in your feet is easy once you know what to do.”

Tips offered by Nirenberg to prevent foot infection include washing your feet everyday. He doesn’t mean simply standing in the shower and letting the water run down to your feet.

“That’s really not

Foot tips

- Bacteria love breeding in damp areas such as saunas, showers, bathrooms and locker rooms. To prevent infections from entering your feet, wear sandals and flip-flops. Always dry your flip-flops and sandals thoroughly before putting them away.
- Feet need to be lathered with soap and scrubbed with a good brush or loofah.
- Check your feet daily. MRSA often starts as a small bump or swelling. There may not be pain, but that doesn’t mean a serious infection isn’t starting.
- If you have trouble bending over to see the bottom of your feet, have someone check them for you or use a mirror.

enough,” he said. “You need to get between the toes and you need to dry your feet before you slip them into your shoes.”

When it comes to those shoes, Nirenberg said it’s important to periodically spray Lysol in shoes to kill bacteria.

He also recommends health club members or avid joggers alternate between two pairs of gym shoes – workout in one pair while the other airs out.

“The best way to air out gym shoes is direct sunlight,” Nirenberg said. “Putting gym shoes into a gym bag and having them sit damp and in the dark – that’s a perfect environment for bacteria.”

Nirenberg also recommends before exercise enthusiasts put on their shoes, they dab powder between their toes to absorb moisture.

Using a towel for feet after walking barefoot, then moving the same towel to the rest of your body also can open a door to infection.

Sharing a towel is a no-no, as is using the same towel on your feet (and body) that you use to wipe down equipment at the gym.

Nirenberg’s booklet recommends washing towels in water temperature hotter than 40 degrees if using bleach or 60 degrees without bleach.

Children are at great risk for foot infections. Quite often Nirenberg has kids coming to his practice with badly infected feet. Usually it begins with an ingrown toenail.

“For whatever reason, they’re afraid to tell their parents they have a sore toe,” Nirenberg said. “Maybe some are afraid to

tell because they won’t get to play their favorite sport. They’ve got to let mom and dad know.”

Dr. Paul Sommer of Family Foot and Ankle Clinic in Valparaiso, Portage and DeMotte has a daughter involved in dance, so he knows firsthand parents’ concern for MRSA. Sommer said dance, gymnastics and wrestling are activities requiring a lot of kids to come in contact with the same surfaces.

“There needs to be a cleaning protocol for the mats,” Sommer said. “Parents need to ask what that protocol is.”

Sommer is also in the process of writing an article on medical situations where the use of antibiotics is unnecessary. One example is in the case of an ingrown toenail, which Sommer treats in his office without the use of

antibiotics.

“Bacteria can develop due to the overuse of antibiotics,” he said.

An example is when a patient applies antibiotic ointment to a Band-Aid, which is then applied to the infected toenail.

The Band-Aid tends to push the skin on the toenail, making it worse, while the ointment makes the skin in the infected area more susceptible to having the toenail cut into it. Sommer temporarily removes the portion of the nail causing the infection, which in turn will grow back in three to six months.

In more mild cases, the afflicted digit can be soaked in saltwater or Epsom salts.

Nirenberg, who says he plans to post tips for “Winterizing Your Feet,” on his Web site soon, said many people are not aware – until they get a bad infection in their feet – that they have to be more careful.

“I want to educate people,” he said. “I love feet. I think they’re fascinating. People don’t realize how fascinating they are.”

To receive a complimentary copy of Dr. Nirenberg’s booklet, visit www.americaspodiatrist.com and click “Special Reports.”

Sommer’s Web site is www.familyfoot.com.