

Put Your Best Foot Forward

By Marisa Walker

It's easy to take your feet for granted, but caring for those 10-digit shock absorbers is essential for any runner. After all, your feet take you across miles of pavement, uneven terrain and the finish line. Ignore them long enough, and you might end up with painful--and unsightly--problems, from calluses to lost toenails. Follow this advice to treat common issues. Your feet will thank you.

Black Nails

SYMPTOMS: A nail, usually on the big toe, looks dark and blackened, and may fall off.

WHY IT HAPPENS: "Black nails occur as a result of microtrauma," says runner Dr. Robert Klein, a podiatric physician and foot surgeon. "As you run, the top of the shoe rubs against the toe." The impact can cause blood to collect under the nail; if it isn't aspirated, the extra blood and fluid can eventually separate the nail from its bed, causing the nail to fall off.

As the weather warms up, you may be more prone to black toenails because your feet swell, making your shoes tighter and the friction greater. Runners who regularly do hill workouts are at higher risk because the feet hit the front of the shoes repeatedly on the downhill efforts.

HOW TO DEAL: Don't force the nail off; let it detach or have your doctor remove it. Then put a bandage around the toe to cushion the nail bed from trauma, Klein recommends. Once the nail separates, a thin, new nail grows underneath it that must stay protected. If you notice redness and swelling after more than a week or two, see your doctor immediately.

To prevent this condition, keep your toenails trimmed and wear wicking socks to help your feet stay dry and to prevent slipping inside your shoes.

To hide an unsightly black nail, it's OK to polish the damaged nail and/or the new nail that has grown underneath it. Before you apply a color, try Nailtiques Nail Protein Formula 2 (\$10, nailtiques.com), which uses keratin, protein, gelatin and calcium to build a healthy nail foundation.

Blisters

SYMPTOMS: A fluid-filled bubble develops where your shoe has been rubbing against your skin.

WHY IT HAPPENS: "Blisters are extremely common with new runners," Klein says. "The skin might not have toughened up yet, or you might not be wearing the right socks."

Even if you're a longtime runner, poorly fitting shoes can cause chafing. "Many women sacrifice the condition of their feet by wearing shoes that are a half-size too big or too small," says Dr. Diane Berson, dermatologist and skincare consultant. "The side effects of this include blisters and cracked heels as shoes either rub against the feet all day or pinch too tightly."

HOW TO DEAL: Break in your sneakers before you attempt long-distance running. Klein recommends wearing technical socks of a nylon/Lycra blend to wick away moisture and to support the foot. He also suggests applying FootGlide Anti-Blister Foot Formula (\$9, drugstores), a roll-on balm, "anywhere you're prone to chafing." For a long run, try Nexcare Active Waterproof Blister Pads (\$5, shop3m.com) on your trouble spots.

If your blister is small, leave it alone and simply take a day off from running. If it's large and painful, you'll need to decompress it. "Sterilize a needle and open up the base of the blister," Klein says. "But leave the skin over it--it works as a biological Band-Aid." If the blister is red, use an over-the-counter antibiotic cream and "refrain from running until the redness goes down," Klein says. "If it doesn't go down in a week or so, or you see red streaks, see your doctor."

Calluses

SYMPTOMS: Hard, thickened skin develops over bony protrusions of your foot, usually on the ball or on the heel. The skin can appear yellow or discolored.

WHY IT HAPPENS: Hyperkeratosis, or thickening of the skin (calluses), occurs to protect areas of your body that are subject to repeated pressure. They're usually painless but can be an eyesore.

HOW TO DEAL: "When it comes to calluses, don't take a razor to them," says Klein. "You're not trained, and if you cut yourself, you can't run. Instead, use a pumice stone and gently abrade the callus down to get the top layer off." Remember, calluses are similar to armor--resist the urge to scrape your calluses down to the softest layer of skin.

Before abrading, soak your feet to soften skin. A simple homemade footbath of hot water, milk and sugar can do the trick. Or treat yourself with the mixture of dry herbs, coarse salt and orange peel in Carol's Daughter Rosemary & Sage Herbal Foot Bath (\$9, carolsdaughter.com).

Klein recommends applying CalleX Ointment (\$15, xenna.com), which exfoliates and moisturizes with an acid-free, non-irritating formula. Try the two-step Borghese Satina Smoothing Callus Remover (\$15, ULTA and select chain stores): Roll on a deeply penetrating ointment that softens skin with tea-tree extract, then use the rasp and foot file to gently exfoliate.

Pedicure Perfection

According to celebrity manicurist Skyy Hadley, biweekly pedicures are your best bet to make your tired toes and feet healthy for spring. Follow these tips to pamper yourself at home.

1. Remove polish, and soak your feet for at least 10 minutes in warm water and bath salts or a few drops of Avon Foot Works Conditioning Foot Soak (\$4, avon.com).
2. Exfoliate with a scrub like Orly Pearl Silk Sugarcane Food & Leg Scrub (\$28, transdesign.com). Rub your heels and the balls of your feet with a pumice stone to slough off dead skin and calluses.
3. After feet are fully exfoliated, rinse and then moisturize with a non-greasy lotion. We like Freeman Bare Foot Peppermint & Plum Softening Foot Lotion (\$4, freemanbeauty.com). You can also apply cuticle oil or cream on your toes. "This really hydrates and brings moisture into the skin," says Hadley, "taking the dryness and dullness away and helping polish last."
4. Give your toenails a quick buff, and separate them to avoid smudges with E.L.F. Toe Separators and Nail Block (\$1 each, eyeslipsface.com).
5. Apply two coats of polish; look for formulas that are free of formaldehyde and toluene. We like the vegan Sparitual Nail Lacquers (\$9, sparitual.com) and Black Radiance Calcium Enriched Nail Color (\$4, drugstores), which strengthens nails. And don't forget a top coat to help your pedicure last longer.