

# Diabetes Today

## Animal House's Flounder Working To Increase Diabetes Awareness

(NAPS)—Actor Stephen Furst, perhaps best known for his role as Flounder in *National Lampoon's Animal House*, has learned a great deal about diabetes and foot care during the past five years.

Furst, who was diagnosed with diabetes at age 17, nearly lost his left foot in 1996 due to a blister that had gone unnoticed.

More than 16 million Americans have diabetes, and each year more than 86,000 of them have amputations resulting from foot ulcers or chronic wounds. Doctors estimate that nearly 50 percent of these could have been prevented through a combination of awareness, prevention and intervention.

"I never felt my shoe rubbing against my foot because I have very little feeling in my feet. I have neuropathy, which is caused by my diabetes," said Furst. "I took my shoe off and saw blood on my sock. When the blister didn't heal for a few weeks, I realized it might be a little more serious than I thought."

The problem *was* serious. Doctors told Furst they would have to amputate part of his foot. This amputation scare gave him the wake-up call he needed to make a drastic change in his lifestyle, not only with regard to his foot care but also with his weight.

"I was overweight and I didn't believe there was anything I could do to change it," said Furst. "I was lying in my hospital bed that night, trying to joke with the doctors about my condition when I realized this wasn't a joke, it was real life. And I only came to that realization after I called for Chinese take-out and got caught. I finally bottomed out."

In the weeks following the amputation scare, Furst developed a single goal: to feel as full as possible and still lose weight. He experimented creatively in the



**Actor Stephen Furst takes a serious look at diabetes and promotes importance of foot care.**

kitchen to develop low-fat versions of his favorite food and started a weight-loss goal of one to two pounds per week.

"I consider myself lucky that the only problems I am forced to deal with are limited feeling in my feet and poor eyesight," says Furst. "But then again, is that really lucky?"

Furst learned another tough lesson in December 1999. He was walking barefoot in his house and unknowingly stepped on a piece of glass. Again, the only indication he had that he was injured was the blood he saw.

"Now I never walk barefoot—no matter what the circumstances," Furst said. "I keep house shoes by my bed and slip them on as soon as I get up. I don't walk barefoot on pool decks because I can't even feel the heat from the concrete and I want to make sure I don't burn the bottoms of my feet."

Furst also makes regular visits to his podiatrist, who makes sure his toenails are in good condition and his feet are free of any corns or calluses that may cause complications.

According to Dr. Maria Dill, Regional Medical Director for Curative Health Services and Medical Director at the Valley Baptist Wound Care Center in Harlingen, Texas, the kinds of measures Furst has started taking are among the key preventive steps that should be taken to avoid the serious complications that can result from diabetes.

"People with diabetes have the opportunity to significantly affect their condition by taking proactive measures to care for themselves," said Dill. "These measures can range from preventing ingrown toenails by trimming nails straight across, to limiting the intake of salt, fat and sugar in their daily diets."

"It's also very important to know the warning signs for neuropathy, or nerve damage, and take the preventive measures that can help avoid or minimize the severity of injuries, sores and infections," added Dill.

Without proper treatment, injuries resulting from neuropathy can become serious wound problems, resulting in chronic infections, gangrene and possibly amputation.

If nonhealing foot ulcers occur, consult with a physician. Wound Care Centers® consider a chronic, nonhealing wound to be one which has not demonstrated significant improvement after four weeks, or has not healed completely after eight weeks.

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