

When My Feet Hurt... Problems of the Foot and Ankle

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Our feet. They take us everywhere we go. They support us when we stand and allow us to participate in many activities we love. Yet, feet are two of the most neglected parts of the body.

Foot problems are often overlooked during routine medical examinations. However, foot problems affect 1 out of 6 persons in the United States. No wonder, since the feet are made up of 28 bones and 35 joints.

While foot problems can be associated with multiple medical problems, the most common cause of foot pain is – footwear.

Footwear

Most women buy smaller sized shoes that squeeze their forefoot. In 1993, the Council on Women's Footwear of the American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society, showed that of the 356 women studied, 88% were wearing shoes smaller than their feet. More than ¾ of these women complained of foot pain. The American Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Society provides the following tips to help reduce foot pain related to footwear:

- Pick the shoe by how it fits your foot.
- Select a shoe that best conforms to the shape of your forefoot.
- Regularly measure foot size.
- Fit shoes to the larger foot.
- Size shoes at the end of the day.
- Allow one finger width in the end of the shoe
- The ball of the foot should fit snugly into the widest part of the shoe.
- Don't expect a shoe to "stretch to fit".
- Heel should fit comfortably without positioning.
- Walk in the store with the shoe to check the fit.

Keep in mind that dress shoes often have a narrow toe area and compress the toes. "Foot friendly shoes" are usually made of soft leather with extra depth and a wide toe box. While they are often considered less attractive, they are better for the foot.

While foot pain is most commonly caused by poor shoe fit, it can be associated with many other foot conditions.



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Heel Pain

Heel pain can be caused by plantar fasciitis, arthritis, stress fractures, nerve impingement, tendinitis or bursitis and often overuse activity. Treatment includes stretching, the use of heel cup, orthotics or night splints, anti-inflammatory medications and reduction in activity. In severe cases, a temporary cast or steroid injections may be necessary. Most heel pain resolves after 6 to 12 weeks of non-operative care. Surgery is indicated in fewer than 5% of the cases and should not be considered without a year of compliant non-operative treatment.

Corns and Calluses

Corns and calluses are characterized by thickening of the skin between or on top of toes (corns) or on the bottom of the foot (calluses). Both are caused by excessive irritation and pressure and can be very painful. Both are treated by shaving down the affected skin, along with the use of pads and orthotics. In both cases a patient should start by modifying his or her footwear. Surgical procedures are used to treat corns and calluses and can be very successful.

Hammertoes and Bunions

Hammertoes are characterized by a curling of the small toes, causing pain on the top or tip of toes or on the ball of the foot. Treatment includes footwear consideration, calf and toe stretching and toe splints/pads. Surgery is another option and is geared to straighten the toes and re-balance the foot.

A bunion is an enlargement on the top or inside of the great toe. While the area itself is not necessarily painful, bunions are often associated with other sources of forefoot pain including the inside of the second toe and beneath the ball of the foot. Along with the importance of footwear evaluation, bunions are treated with calf stretching, bunion splints or pads, modifying pain producing activity and sometimes surgery. Surgery corrects the bunion by re-aligning the great toe.

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When My Feet Hurt...

Problems of the Foot and Ankle continued...

Neuroma

Occasionally foot pain is caused by an entrapment of a nerve in the interspace of the foot. This is commonly found in the outer part of the forefoot. Treatment includes footwear modification, shoe inserts/orthotics, steroid injection and surgery.

Arthritis

Arthritis is a common problem of the foot and ankle, mostly affecting the great toe, midfoot and ankle, and is often associated with a previous injury. Treatment includes orthotics, bracing, activity modification, medications and sometimes surgery. Many patients who continue to have foot pain despite orthotic/brace management often find significant pain relief with surgery.

Flatfoot Deformity

Flatfoot is a common condition that, while not always painful, can be associated with ankle/foot injuries. Patients with flatfoot develop a progressive change in the contour of the foot and often see a physician when experiencing ankle pain. Treatment includes patient education, orthotics, braces and activity modification. Surgery can also be effective in relieving pain and correcting the deformity.

Diabetic Feet

Any discussion of foot and ankle care should include important information about diabetes. Diabetes, a very common disease, can cause problems with ulcer formation in the feet. As a result, patients with diabetes need to take extra precautions to examine their feet for sores. Abnormal pressure to the feet can develop into foot ulcers, a common diabetic condition that can lead to foot amputations. Proper footwear, daily foot inspection and regular physician visits are critical to good diabetic foot health.

When Surgery is the Treatment

It is important to emphasize again that foot and ankle problems are often aggravated by improper footwear. Most often, shoe modification is the first line of treatment. Orthotics and physical therapy (stretching) are also prescribed. Surgical treatments are used to improve function with the goals of correcting the underlying cause of the problem and correcting deformity. When surgery is the option, it is important that the surgeon and patient work closely together to achieve the most successful return to normal foot function.

For more information, call Advanced HealthLine at (262) 512-2880 or toll-free at 1-888-709-2080 outside the Milwaukee metro area, or log on at www.ah.com.

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