

## ► FOOT PROBLEMS ◀

About 75 percent of Americans have foot problems at some point during their lives. A complex structure of 26 bones, 40 joints, and an intricate maze of tendons, muscles, and ligaments, the average foot endures remarkable stresses throughout a lifetime. Yet, as much as we use our feet, we often take them for granted.

Although most foot problems are not life threatening, their presence can spoil many of life's enjoyable activities.

### Common Foot Problems

Many foot problems can be corrected by modifying shoes, by medication, or through a simple procedure to relieve pain and suffering. Some common foot problems are listed below.

- **Bunions**

Bunions are swellings or enlargements that develop at the joint of the big toe where it meets the foot. Women develop bunions about 10 times as often as men, and the prevalence of bunions increases with age. Left untreated, bunions may lead to bursitis (inflammation of the sac that cushions the joint), pressure and foot pain. Changing the type of shoe to accommodate the bunion will usually reduce pain. If this doesn't work, surgery may help.

- **Corns and calluses**

Thickened and hardened patches of dead skin cells, these cause pain as they transmit pressure to the bones of the feet. Corns usually develop on the toes, while calluses are more likely to occur on the soles.

- **Diabetes**

People with diabetes are particularly prone to foot problems because of nerve damage associated with the disease. Pressure sores or infections often occur in people with diabetes. Because diabetes may impair the sense of feeling in the feet, people with this illness need to be particularly vigilant about foot care. Sores and infections may take much longer to heal, so any cuts should receive immediate medical attention.

- **Fallen arches (flat feet)**

This is a condition in which the arch of the foot has dropped, causing muscle fatigue and aching, pain or stiffness in the feet, legs and lower back. Custom-designed orthotics may be prescribed to alleviate the problem. Sometimes, surgery is indicated.

- **Fungal and bacterial conditions**

Athlete's foot and similar conditions can cause redness, peeling, blisters and itching of the skin. If not treated promptly, these can become chronic and difficult to cure.

- **Hammertoes**

A hammertoe is a painful deformation of the toe joint in which the toe curls downward, resembling a claw. Pain occurs on the top of the middle joint of the toe. Roomier shoes, splints, exercises and orthotic devices can alleviate pain. In more severe cases, surgery can provide relief.

- **Heel Pain**

Pain occurring around the heel can often be attributed to nerve compression or

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inflammation of the tissues attached to the heel bone. Wearing well-fitted shoes, using orthotic devices or casts, stretching exercises, pre-scribed medications and, in severe cases, surgery, are all methods used to correct this problem.

- **Ingrown toenails**

The result of poor trimming of the nails or pressure from a nail deformity, ingrown toenails can cause infection and disabling pain. Once infected, they require medical attention.

- **Morton's neuroma**

This condition is the inflammation of a nerve in the ball of the foot. Pain sometimes extends toward the tip of the toe or to the ankle and lower leg. Your doctor may suggest roomier shoes, shoe pads, or cortisone injections. If these treatments don't work, surgery may be recommended.

- **Ankle Sprains**

Patients can frequently injure the ligaments of their ankles with simple twisting injuries. About 23,000 ankle sprains occur daily in the United States. Most of these improve by themselves when treated with rest, ice compression and elevation. Some patients will need to see their physician for additional treatment, bracing or a physical therapy prescription. Sometimes, patients with chronic ankle sprains, or pain which does not improve with physical therapy or conservative treatment, may require operative intervention. This may incorporate arthroscopic procedures or open procedures.

- **Arthritis of the Foot and Ankle**

Arthritis can affect any joint of the foot and ankle just as it affects the larger joints throughout the body. Forms of arthritis include inherited, traumatic, overuse and

inflammatory. These can be treated with medication, modified shoe wear and physical therapy. Arthritic conditions of the foot and ankle may require operative intervention involving arthrodesis, also known as fusion, in which joints are screwed together. Arthrodesis is often performed to relieve pain and improve function. Ankle replacement surgery is a new and potentially promising form of therapy for patients with ankle arthritis.

- **Plantar warts**

These are viral skin infections found on the soles of the feet. Plantar warts require medical attention.

## **Who treats foot problems?**

Orthopaedic surgeons are medical doctors who have received additional, specialized training to treat the bony structures of the body. You should see an orthopaedic surgeon to treat more complex foot and ankle problems. Orthopaedic surgeons specialize in Foot and Ankle Surgery. Doctors of podiatric medicine, or podiatrists, are medically trained specialists who diagnose and treat problems and diseases of the foot, ankle and lower extremities. They are recognized legally and professionally as full members of the health care team. Podiatrists can correct most minor foot and ankle problems.

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