

Do your feet hurt? Let's start with where. Your foot may seem like a small part of your body, but with 28 bones, 36 joints, plus over a hundred different muscles, tendons, and ligaments, there's a lot of places for something to go wrong. It is no wonder that 19% of men and 25% of women experience foot pain that limits their function. Foot pain can be quite debilitating leading to problems working and affect one's happiness and overall well-being. Here we talk about some common causes of foot pain and what we can do about them.

Bunion

What's a bunion? A bunion is a structural deformity with the first metatarsal that causes a bump on the side of the foot behind your first toe. This bump forms when the first toe turns towards the second toe and the metatarsal turns the opposite direction. This bunion is often painful and can lead to difficulty wearing shoes, sub-optimal function when walking and running, and degenerative arthritis. Signs of a bunion are the characteristic bump with redness, soreness and stiffness in the big toe joint.

Many things can contribute to or cause a bunion to form, including tight shoes, genetics, overuse, congenital deformity and inflammatory arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis. X-rays are used to help determine the severity of the bunion deformity and the best treatment options.

Thankfully there are a variety of ways to treat bunions and the pain associated with them. These range from conservative options that involve changing shoe gear, orthotics, and injections to surgical correction. Depending on the severity and x-ray findings, a range of surgical procedures can be performed including bone shaving, bone cutting and realignment or even joint fusions.

Hammertoe

What's a hammertoe? A contracture (or bending) of the lesser toe joints into a fixed position is known as a hammertoe. These can become unsightly and painful, contributing to corn or callus formation. Hammertoes are caused by an imbalance in the musculature of the foot, where the tendons on the bottom of the toes overpower those on the top. Sometimes the toe becomes permanently bent in this flexed position and wearing shoes becomes painful when the top of the toe is rubbing against the inside of a closed toe shoe. With constant rubbing in the area causing friction, calluses and corns will develop. A lot of times it is faulty biomechanics in your feet that cause hammertoes. Some people are genetically pre-disposed to developing hammertoes, some hammertoes are caused by activity and ill-fitting shoe gear, and some people are just born with them.

As with bunions, X-rays are a mainstay in properly evaluating hammertoes and determining the best treatment options. Treatment starts with determining the true biomechanical cause of the contracted toe and ranges from conservative care to alleviate the pain, such as anti-inflammatory medications, shoe gear changes, orthotics, shaving down corns and calluses, to surgical correction. Surgery is typically very well tolerated and has a variety of options depending on the type and severity of hammertoe. Some of these include tendon transfers, toe fusions, or shortening the toe to hold it in a corrected position. The recovery period for a hammertoe correction involves usually 4 weeks in a boot.

Metatarsalgia

Metatarsalgia is pain in the “ball” of your foot where the metatarsal bones are. Pain and inflammation in this area can have several causes. Overuse from physical activity, certain foot types, and poor shoe gear or fit are common culprits. When increased pressure from tight fitting shoes or a high arched foot occurs in the area of the metatarsal joints with your toes, inflammation occurs. This is also known as capsulitis. This can also occur in feet that are biomechanically unstable or where the first metatarsal is shorter than it should be and the weight of the body is not properly distributed across all metatarsals. Bunions, hammertoes, obesity, and age related fat pad atrophy are all common causes of metatarsalgia.

When treating metatarsalgia, determining the cause of it is critical and x-rays or advanced imaging can help with this. Changing shoe gear to those which properly fit and have a wider toe box can help, as will modifying activities. Orthotics to improve biomechanical function and offload the high pressure area is also very effective. Cortisone injections and anti-inflammatory medications relieve pain and inflammation. If the condition is secondary to a deformity such as a bunion, hammertoe or short 1st metatarsal, surgery to correct these is indicated and sees pain relief.

Heel and Arch Pain

Do your heels or arches hurt? Pain in the arches and heels is one of the most common problems a podiatrist will see. Pain on the bottom of the heel or along the arch on the “inside” of the foot could be due to Plantar Fasciitis. The plantar fascia is a large ligament that runs from your heel bone, down the bottom of the foot to the base of your toes. This serves as a support structure to your foot. If this ligament is tight, when you step down it can pull on its insertion on the heel, causing inflammation and pain. If the pain is very severe, it is possible the plantar fascia is torn. Over time, due to the tightness and pulling on the heel bone, a heel spur can form.

Typically people will say they have pain when they step out of bed in the morning, after sitting down, or when standing on their feet all day. Having a tight Achilles' tendon will make this problem worse, as the Achilles' tendon also inserts on the heel bone. Treatment for this involves adding a heel lift to shoes, orthotics, anti-inflammatory medications and corticosteroid injections. These combined with daily active stretching exercises or physical therapy often do the trick. Plantar fascia tears are treated using a walking boot for 4 weeks followed by physical therapy. Persistent plantar fasciitis, which is rare, can be treated with a number of surgical approaches.

Mass or Lump

Is there a painful mass or lump on your foot? These can be tricky when wearing closed shoes that rub against them. Where is it? If it's on the top of the foot it could be a ganglion cyst. Ganglion cysts are fluid filled sacs that form off of the lining of a joint or tendon. These can be caused by trauma or chronic irritation to an area and are quite bothersome causing inflammation, pain, and sometimes numbness. These can be aspirated in the office and a corticosteroid injection can prevent them from recurring. Other times they can be removed surgically.

If the mass is on the bottom of your foot along your arch, it could be a plantar fibroma. A fibroma is a benign tumor that occurs within the plantar fascia ligament. This can be due to injury or hereditary, causing pain and discomfort when walking or wearing certain shoes. To help alleviate the pain, anti-inflammatory medications and corticosteroid injections as well as orthotics are useful. Certain topical medications containing a calcium channel blocker have also been shown to be useful. Surgical excision of plantar fibromas that fail conservative treatment is also an option.

Another cause for a mass or lump on the foot could be a boney exostosis. This is a boney outgrowth that can occur, usually near a joint. These can cause the area to become painful, inflamed and even discolored if shoe gear is causing constant friction. In certain cases, an arthritic joint has been shown to be the culprit. Anti-inflammatory medications, corticosteroid injections, orthotics and surgical removal are all options when it comes to treating these.

Fractures

Did you overdo it training over the weekend? Stress fractures, also known as hairline fractures, are particularly painful and notoriously difficult to see in X-ray. These injuries are usually from overuse and fatigue and very common in the second metatarsal in runners. Swelling and pain located to a specific area over bone can be a sign of stress fracture. Stress fractures can usually be treated using a walking boot for 6 weeks.

Toe fractures and other fracture types have varying degrees of severity and this determines treatment. Signs of a fracture would be persistent pain and swelling with difficulty or in ability to bear weight following an injury. If you are experiencing this it is highly recommended to have an X-ray to evaluate the injury. Fractures can sometimes be reduced and splinted and sometimes require surgical open reduction with internal fixation. Luckily, bone usually takes only 6-8 weeks to heal.

Whether experiencing acute pain from over doing it on a run, or pain you're experiencing walking or standing during the day, it is a good idea to be evaluated by a podiatrist. This way they can identify exactly what is causing the pain and get your feet back up and running. Call us today for your appointment!

Ingrown Toenail

Winter is coming! So often when the seasons change and people switch up their shoe gear, we see more painful ingrown toenails. An ingrown toenail is when the side of the nail begins growing into the skin, usually in the big toe, causing inflammation, pain and sometimes infection. These are caused by tight or narrow shoes, toenails that aren't cut straight across or that are cut too short, and even injuries to the toe. Performing bathroom surgery at home is a sure way to increase pain and risk of infection. If redness and pus is noted, the area could be infected. Be sure not to let this fester because the nail on the toe is very close to bone, and if bone becomes infected it is extremely difficult to treat! If you or your child has a painful ingrown nail, it may be a good idea to see the podiatrist so that it can be properly managed.

Diabetic Check-Up

Do you or your loved one have Diabetes? Have you seen your podiatrist this year? Managing Diabetes requires discipline and a good support team. In addition to seeing your regular doctor who prescribes medication to help with Diabetes, you also should be seeing a podiatrist regularly for a Diabetic Foot Check-Up. Diabetes affects small blood vessels and nerves which can lead to a number of problems including numbness and delayed skin healing in your feet. That is why it is essential to check your feet daily for any cuts or openings that you may not necessarily feel. Infection can lead to complications such as surgery or even amputation. An area on your foot with redness, swelling, pus, pain, feeling achey or feverish, are all signs of infection to be aware of. Regular Diabetic Foot Exams with a podiatrist have been shown to prevent complications associated with Diabetes.

Corns/Calluses

If you have a painful corn or callus, it's not because you're unlucky! There is usually a biomechanical reason for this. The position of the bones in your feet could be causing extra pressure in these areas where the skin thickens to protect itself. Hammertoes, for instance, can cause corns and calluses to develop on the top of the toes, and sometimes the retrograde pressure from them causes calluses on the bottom of the foot. If your big toe joint motion is decreased, painful calluses can develop on the side of the toe as you roll off the side of your foot during the push off phase of gait. Don't worry, you don't need to start walking on your hands to avoid this. Insoles, custom foot orthotics, prescription creams and debridement of the calluses all can help. Surgical correction of the biomechanical deformity is also always an option to prevent the callus or corn from coming back.