

m health

wellbeing | fitness | performance



PODIATRY

Dealing With Foot Pain the Easy Way

It is hard to imagine life without our feet. Oftentimes, we put them through so much, yet we take them for granted. We barely notice they are there until we take our socks off and smell that putrid concoction of hot and sweaty odours.

But when something goes wrong, the pain isn't localised. More often than not, foot pain is enough to throw your whole body into a tailspin, because suddenly you can't do a lot of the things you like.

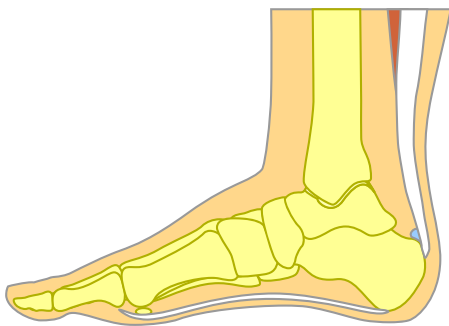
Mundane tasks like brushing or taking a bath become unbearable. Driving becomes hazardous for us and the other people on the road. Sleep gets disrupted every time you stub your toe. And let's not even mention being at work all day.

That is why when people experience foot pain, they want the pain dealt with right away. Often, when people think of an immediate solution they think of surgery.

But if you've ever been under a scalpel before, you know that the recovery time is the most painful time, not the surgery itself.

There are ways to take care of your foot without the need of invasive surgery. You'll not only be pain free, but you'll also learn how to look after your feet so it doesn't happen again.

Taking Care of Your Foot



The foot is comprised of many small bones – 26 to be exact, connected by 33 joints. That's a lot of movement and a lot of friction to handle every day.

Unfortunately, the bones don't get bigger when we add a few pounds. This means their work becomes that much harder.

It's like the wheels on a shopping cart. When the cart is empty, it just whizzes about the place. But the more you fill it up, the harder it is to move. Sure the cart is still doing its job, but after a while, it will buckle under the pressure.

When you put on uncomfortable shoes for long hours of the day, that just makes your feet a lot more vulnerable.

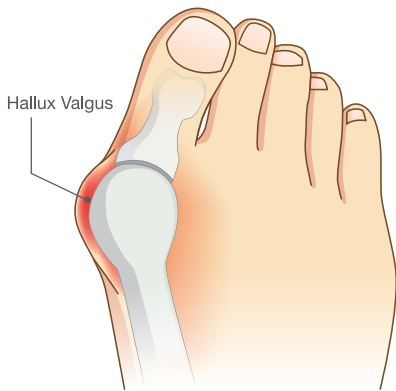
The good thing about it is once we've made the right changes, the foot gets back to normal. A study on foot pain showed that after people lost weight, the number of complaints about foot pain also went down. We also know that when you get out of high heels and into slippers your feet stop aching as much.

Prolonged abuse will lead to deterioration, which shows in the form of aches or pains, dislocations, and diseases.

Below are some common foot pains and disorders, which can be corrected without the need for surgery. While surgical options exist for some of these, they aren't always necessary. It is a podiatrist's job to determine what is needed and what isn't. Here are some recommendations.

Treating Common Foot Pains

► Bunions (hallux valgus)



The name might sound funny (mixture of bun and onions), but anyone who has had that condition or heard about it knows it isn't funny in any way.

It is a bony swelling that forms on the first joint of the big toe. It pushes the big toe against the other toes, which then causes further swelling. It also rubs against your shoes.

Bunions can also form on the joint of your little toe. These are much smaller and are called bunionettes.

Eventually, the skin becomes tough, the joint sticks out even more, and the pain gets worse.

It is uncertain what causes bunions, but some people are genetically predisposed to it. Others get it as a result of too much stress placed on their feet. There are also other medical conditions that can cause bunions, such as arthritis.

Once present, wearing tight or narrow shoes would make it much worse. Bunions can manifest at any time, but the likelihood increases with age. Studies have shown that women in their 40s are almost twice as likely to get it than women in their 30s. Once they reach their 50s, the likelihood doubles. The same occurs for people aged over 60.

There is some good news though. It can be treated.

● Treatment

In most instances, a change in footwear will alleviate the symptoms. Special shoes with more cushion by the big toe will keep it from pushing against the other toes.

Another option is to get ahead of the problem. If you've noticed your big toe has started moving out of alignment, you can in some cases, straighten it out and prevent the bunion from forming.

One method is by placing your feet side by side and looping a rubber band around your big toes. You then pull your feet apart slowly and hold for a few seconds. This exercise should be repeated a few times every day.

You can also consider orthotics. Getting your foot the support it needs may be all you need to make the difference. In some cases, however, when the pain is too severe, surgery would be required. It could take anything from a few weeks to a few months to recover.

The main caution here is to consult a podiatrist once you begin to notice irregularities with your feet. Don't try any homemade remedies until you have talked to the podiatrist.

► Osteoarthritis



Osteoarthritis of the toe is another condition which has become more prominent over time. It shows up as a stiffening of the big toe.

The big toe endures the most strain when we move. Every step puts more pressure on the big toe than the other toes. After suffering high levels of wear and tear, the joint gets tired and the cartilage breaks down.

The result is a condition called hallux limitus. The toe then begins to hurt when you walk or may feel stiff. If it becomes so severe the toe doesn't even move. It has then progressed to a stage called hallux rigidus.

The joint swells up as the cartilage disintegrates and the bones protrude. Some people mistake this for bunions.

Soon, the pain spreads to other toes, and can hurt even when you're sitting or sleeping. Some people also experience a burning sensation.

In order to compensate for the friction between your bones, new bones could develop, called bone spurs.

Unfortunately, when this occurs, walking becomes difficult, so your stance changes. Once this happens, the patient is now more likely to develop bunions. If this persists, other conditions such as corns and hammertoe could develop.

There is no telling who can get this, but it is genetic. People who are obese are also more likely to develop it.

• Treatment

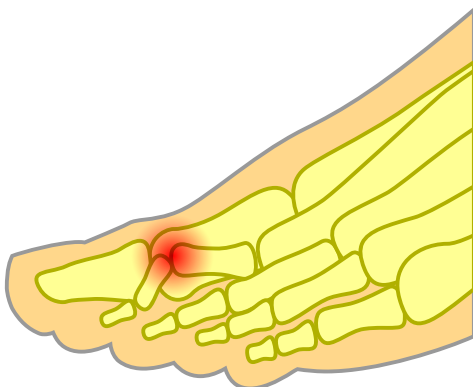
Your first step is to consult a physician. OA is a very painful disease and it only worsens over time. The sooner you get help the better.

Pain relievers are available to help manage the discomfort. You can also apply ice packs to the problem areas to provide temporary solace.

You would also need to change the shoes you wear. Shoes with space around the big toe to prevent friction and strong soles will keep your toes from bending so much.

Exercises at the early stage can help prevent your toe from stiffening. Surgery is also an option, though it is usually recommended at advanced stages.

▶ Hammertoe



This is when one or more of your toes bend downwards instead of up. The second and third toes are usually the most affected, and the condition could begin from as early as birth.

Other causes include but are not limited to arthritis and wearing restrictive shoes. Hammertoe can also develop if the tendons and ligaments in the toe are severely tightened, or as a result of a previous injury.

As mentioned earlier, hammertoe can also form as a result of bunions. It is apparent how one foot injury or deformity can lead to another, or in some cases several others.

The result is constant pain when you walk. The toes bend downwards, thus acting as a hammer every time your toes hit the ground.

• Treatment

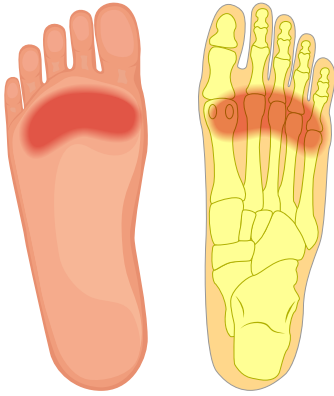
The first point of action is to accurately determine what is wrong and where. This is easily done with an X-ray.

In mild instances, the condition can be corrected by wearing the right shoe size, or by putting on comfortable shoes. This will stop forcing the toes out of shape and it will correct itself.

If the condition has been caused by high arching feet, then orthotics will do the trick. Toe pads will correct the position of the toe, which will then also relieve the pain.

As expected, once the condition has crossed a certain point, surgery would be the only option.

► Metatarsalgia



This is a relatively common condition for people who are very active and somewhat aggressive on their feet.

Metatarsalgia is when the ball of the foot becomes inflamed due to repetitive pounding.

The most vulnerable group are people who run and jump quite often. It can also present itself when there has been a foot deformity, or when shoes that are too tight or too loose are worn regularly.

One key symptom is a burning sensation on your sole, just behind your toes. This might be hard to diagnose or pay attention to, as it alleviates itself when you rest.

However, if the pain persists for a few days, then you know it's not just typical pain and more drastic steps are needed.

● Treatment

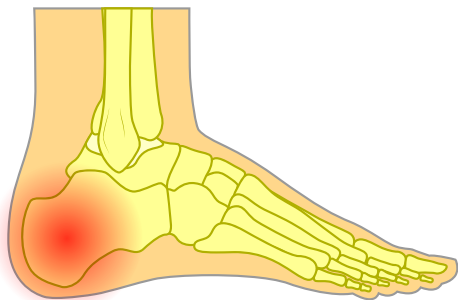
Fortunately, it is the mildest of the conditions listed so far, with very simple treatment procedures.

A few days' rest off your feet will help get rid of the swelling more often than not. In some cases, you might need an ice pack or two to cool things off.

You can also try changing your shoes or using a metatarsal pad.

If the condition has been complicated by another condition such as hammer toe, surgery might be required to realign the metatarsal bones.

► Heel Pain Syndrome



From the toes to the ball, now we move to the heel.

Heel pain syndrome is when the cushions in the heel get worn down by age or excess weight and it becomes inflamed.

The centre of your heel aches, making walking, standing and even sitting unbearable.

• Treatment

Thankfully this is another mild condition which can be treated with some bed rest and ice packs.

You should also change your shoes to more comfortable flats. You might need a heel pad or heel cup.

What Else is Out There?

You might be wondering what to do about other conditions and that is a valid point. This guide is just a briefing on some of the most common and severe conditions.

Other foot pains, infections and diseases include:



Some of these can be easily dealt with at home or with over the counter prescriptions, while others need professional attention.

Getting the Right Treatment



The range of pains in the foot from mild to severe can be quite misleading. Some chronic pains can be dealt with by resting, while others may require you to do the opposite.

It is imperative that you consult a physician if you begin to feel any of the above conditions or other aches or pains in your feet.

The two main causes of foot pain in these conditions are ill-fitting shoes (either too tight or too big) and obesity.

It cannot be stressed enough the need to keep your weight in check to prevent pains in your feet and other parts of the body.

Ironically, even those trying to improve their physiology can do more harm than good by performing the wrong exercises. Too much repetitive pressure on the feet can cause lasting damage.

Every foot is unique, so in order to know what is right for you, consult your physician or a trusted podiatrist.

Given the similarities between some of these conditions, self-medication is not advisable. Some of these conditions also quickly spiral into others, which is another reason why professional help is necessary.

The good news is that in most cases surgery isn't required, but all you need are a few minor alterations to your lifestyle and or habits.

What changes will you make today to alleviate or prevent foot pain in your life?