



ACHING FEET 101

A top 10 list of ailments and treatments, provided by local foot docs.

by Ronni Wilde, for The Bulletin Special Projects

Our poor feet. They take a beating every single day and are what we rely upon to get us around. Estimates show that the average American takes as many as 5,000 steps a day, and together, our feet contain 25 bones, more than 60 joints and 200 muscles, tendons and ligaments. And yet, feet are perhaps the most neglected parts of our bodies. Until they hurt, we rarely give them a second thought.

"Our feet are our means of locomotion and transportation, especially here in Central Oregon. People retire here to be active," said Dr. Dean Nakadate, a board-certified podiatric surgeon and owner of Deschutes Foot & Ankle in Bend and Redmond.

"Unlike other parts of your body, like hands, you can't get away from your feet unless you are not mobile or in a wheelchair," said Barrett Ford, owner of Step & Spine Physical Therapy in Bend, Redmond and Sisters.

Because our feet are so heavily used, they can begin to break down as we age.

"As we try to stay active in aging, resiliency in muscles is gone," said Ford.

There are steps that can be taken to help maintain overall foot health, however, such as exercises to preserve flexibility and balance, proper shoe selection and knowing when to seek help if a condition persists.

"If you don't keep the foot flexible, you get areas of breakdown," said Ford, likening stiff feet, ankles and calves to 2-by-4 boards nailed together without a hinge. "There has to be some give."

To help with flexibility, Ford suggests stretching exercises for the toes, ankle and calf. For the toes, he recommends wiggling them independently or manually by reaching down and moving them back and forth with your hands. For the ankles and calves, he suggests stretching exercises that can be done against a wall at home or in the gym. Warm baths to help keep circulation going and balancing exercises can also help, he said.

"In aging, balance becomes

a big monster," he said. To help maintain balance, he recommends standing on one foot for a minute.

"If you can't stand on one foot for a minute or so, use a doorframe and use your hands to cheat until you can stay balanced for a minute. If your balance is good, stand on one foot with your eyes closed. Then, the next challenge would be to move your head side to side or up and down."

Nat Chotechuang, podiatric physician and surgeon at Northwest Foot Care in Bend, cites properly fitting shoes with adequate cushioning, easing into new sports activities rather than jumping in and doing too much too soon and maintaining reasonable body weight as keys to avoiding injury.

When pain or injury does occur, Nakadate said that many foot issues can be treated without seeing a doctor through three important steps: offloading (or resting) the involved area, removing inflammation through icing and use of anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen and wearing

proper shoes.

"Start with conservative measures, such as wearing wider shoes or using pads," said Nakadate, who is a diplomate of the American Board of Podiatric Surgery and a fellow of the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons. "A simple pair of shoes, such as clogs, or changing shoe wear can offload an involved tendon. We are fortunate to have great shoe stores here."

Over-the-counter orthotics and other drug-store foot products can also help in some cases.

Another basic but important step to maintaining foot health, added Ford, is simply paying attention to your feet.

"You have to check your feet sometimes, especially if there is neuropathy, because you don't always know what is happening down there."

In their patients 50 and older, the doctors cite injuries pertaining to wear and tear and arthritic changes as what they most commonly treat in their practices.

THE TOP 10:

PLANTAR FASCIITIS

Plantar fasciitis is an overuse injury of the plantar fascia, a ligament on the bottom of the foot that helps support the arch.

"Plantar fasciitis is perhaps the most common cause of foot pain," said Chotechuang. "This can be caused by an overly rapid increase in exercise, recent weight gain, obesity, walking or running on very hard surfaces, taking up a new sport or activity, prolonged standing, lack of flexibility and having faulty biomechanics."

Pain often appears near the inside bottom of the heel and feels like a sharp, stabbing pain that is pronounced upon first stepping out of bed or out of a chair, then eases up as you walk a bit, said Chotechuang. Preventative measures include stretching, rolling, gradual increase in activity, wearing properly supportive footwear and strengthening foot and leg muscles.

"Having good overall hip and core muscle balance helps prevent overload of the plantar fascia, as does maintaining a healthy body weight and using good form in your chosen activity." The time to seek medical attention, he said, is if there is no improvement after a few weeks.

"This malady can become chronic and much more difficult to heal if you let it go too long."

BUNIONS

A bunion is an enlargement of bone or tissue around the joint at the base of the big toe that looks like a reddened, bony knob. As the bunion grows, the big toe may turn in toward the second toe and cause swelling and pain with shoe wear. Bunions can be caused by genetics, but in many cases are attributed to wearing shoes that are too tight.

Nonsurgical treatment involves wearing shoes with a wider toe box, wearing a spacer between your big and second toe, taping your toe and/or applying ice to your toe and the bunion. If these simple measures are not effective, surgery may be needed to remove it.

INGROWN TOENAILS

An ingrown toenail is a common condition in which a corner or a side of a toenail digs into the surrounding skin causing pain, swelling, redness and sometimes infection.

Common causes include cutting the toenail too short, wearing ill-fitting shoes, direct impact to the toe and having unusually curved toenails. Preventative measures include not cutting the nails shorter than the end of the toe and wearing shoes that fit properly.

"The toe box of the shoe should be adequately wide such that there is minimal side-to-side pressure against the toes," said Chotechuang.

Home treatments include warm water Epsom salt soaks and gently elevating the corner of the nail away from the skin and packing a small piece of cotton underneath the corner of the nail.

"Seek medical attention if you experience severe pain, if you suspect infection or if you are diabetic and/or have a compromised immune system," he said.

HALLUX RIGIDUS OR "STIFF BIG TOE"

The most common site of arthritis in the foot is at the base of the big toe. This joint is important because it has to bend with every step. If the joint stiffens, walking can become painful and difficult.

"The big toe has a big job," said Ford. "It's the most important to keep mobile."

Symptoms include pain in the joint when active, especially as you push off the toes, swelling around the joint, a bump or callus that develops on the top of the foot and stiffness in the big toe with inability to bend it up or down.

Treatment includes pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medications, applying ice packs, soaking the foot using alternating cold and hot water to reduce inflammation, wearing a shoe with a large toe box, avoiding wearing high heels, wearing a stiff-soled shoe with a rocking or rolling bottom design, a metal brace in the shoe sole or surgery if these other methods don't work.

SESAMOIDITIS

There are two small bones beneath the ball of the foot behind the big toe that function as little pulleys for the big toe.

"Sesamoiditis" is injury to those small bones, which can cause pain when standing, running or bending the big toe, said Chotechuang.

"Common causes include overuse, loss of fat pads with aging, inadequately cushioned footwear and direct trauma, such as jumping down too hard directly onto the ball of the foot," he said.

Preventative measures include using adequately cushioned footwear, avoiding too much high-impact activity on hard surfaces such as concrete and allowing adequate time for rest and recovery after doing a sport or activity that requires a lot of toe bending or impact.

Home treatment includes rest, icing, protection and cushioning of the foot beneath the sesamoid bones and gradual return to activity. Seek medical attention if pain does not go away after a few weeks, if pain is severe or if there is bruising and swelling.

POSTERIOR TIBIAL TENDON DYSFUNCTION, OR "ADULT-ACQUIRED FLATFOOT"

This occurs when the posterior tibial tendon, which attaches the calf muscle to the bones on the inside of the foot, becomes inflamed or torn. When this happens, the tendon may not be able to provide stability for the arch of the foot and can result in flatfoot.

Common causes are an acute injury such as from a fall, tearing due to overuse during high-impact sports such as basketball, tennis or soccer, wear and tear in aging, obesity, diabetes and hypertension.

The condition can usually be treated without surgery, using orthotics and braces, but surgery is sometimes needed to relieve pain.

METATARSALAGIA OR "PAIN IN THE FOREFOOT"

A common overuse injury, "metatarsalgia" describes pain and inflammation in the ball of the

foot. It can be caused by high-impact sports involving running or jumping, including tennis, football, baseball and soccer.

Treatment can include icing and application of a pressure bandage, rest, ultrasound treatments and use of metatarsal pads and other orthotic devices. A change in footwear or semi-rigid corrective devices worn in supportive shoes can also be effective treatments.

MORTON'S NEUROMA

Morton's neuroma is a swollen or thickened nerve in the ball of the foot. When toes are squeezed together too often and for too long, the nerve that runs between the toes can swell and get thicker, causing pain when walking. High-heeled, tight or narrow shoes can make the pain worse. Sometimes, switching to shoes that give your toes more room can help. Morton's neuroma can feel like a small lump inside the ball of the foot, usually between the third and fourth toes.

Treatment can be simple, such as wearing well-fitting shoes with plenty of room for toes, icing, taking anti-inflammatory medications and resting your feet when you can. Massaging the foot to relax the muscles around the nerve can also help. If these steps don't provide relief, your doctor may suggest using special pads or devices, a steroid shot or perhaps surgery.

NEUROPATHY

Neuropathy is a complex, chronic pain that is usually accompanied by tissue injury. With neuropathic pain, damaged nerve fibers send incorrect signals to other pain centers. Common causes of neuropathy can include alcoholism, amputation, back, leg and hip problems, chemotherapy, diabetes, facial nerve problems, HIV infection or AIDS, multiple sclerosis, shingles and spine surgery.

Symptoms may include shooting and burning pain, tingling and numbness.

Treatment can include medications such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, painkillers, anticonvulsants and sometimes antidepressant drugs. If another

disorder exists, such as diabetes, better management of that condition can help alleviate pain. In extreme cases, invasive or implantable devices may be used, as well as electrical stimulation of the nerves involved. Other treatments include physical therapy, working with a counselor, relaxation therapy, massage and acupuncture.

FAT PAD THINNING

Fat pad thinning is a condition that refers to the loss of the protective fat pad cushioning that sits under the bones in the ball of the foot. It can cause significant pain while walking because the shock absorption from the fatty tissue is no longer there. This leads to inflammation and eventual damage to the bones. Possible causes of fat pad thinning include aging, choice of footwear – such as wearing high heels or walking barefoot or in very thinned-soled shoes, having extremely high arches, excessive pronation (rolling in), injury to the ball of the foot, multiple surgery incisions, fractures, genetics, diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis.

Symptoms are pain in the ball of the foot that becomes worse when barefoot, in heels or in thinned-soled shoes, pain that is worse when standing and better when

sitting, feeling like there is a small rock in the shoe and calluses that become thick on the ball of the foot.

Treatment can include avoiding activities that require walking on tiptoes, squatting, walking down a slope or any action that puts pressure on the balls of the feet; avoiding wearing high heels, low heels and barefoot walking; switching from high-impact weight-bearing exercises to low-impact alternatives; use of orthotics or soft padding; wearing supportive footwear that provides cushioning; and possibly surgery.

While this list includes some of the more common conditions mentioned by the doctors, it is by no means complete.

“If something is causing a problem, or if there’s infection, see a doctor right away,” Nakadate said. “Or if anything persists, and is limiting your lifestyle, then get treatment. There is a plethora of foot specialists here in Central Oregon.”

Ford agrees that when a foot problem becomes persistent or is recurrent, it’s time to see a doctor or specialist.

“When pain persists for multiple weeks, or if you just aren’t having fun anymore, it’s time to see someone,” he said.



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