



Putting your best foot forward: Knowing how to recognize foot problems

Putting your best foot forward is easier said than done when you've got sore, aching feet. From the moment we get out of bed, our feet begin their long and sometimes painful job of getting us around all day. They may be subjected to damp, bacteria-laden conditions, ill-fitting shoes (not to mention pointy toes or high heels), hard surfaces, too much weight and other factors that can cause them to not only ache, but be downright painful. Some of the more recognized foot problems are:

Athlete's Foot – characterized by dry, itchy, red and/or peeling skin on the feet. Brought on by extended exposure to warm, dark and damp spaces, such as those inside our shoes or in public showers and change rooms, this fungal infection is contagious and can be hard to cure.

Corns and calluses – caused by direct pressure and rubbing in one area of the foot, corns are small "bumps" of dead skin usually positioned close to a bone (such as on or just beside your big toe) or between toes. Extensive pressure and rubbing are also the cause of calluses, which are more commonly found on the soles of our feet. Although they can be a bit painful, corns and calluses are usually just annoying and no real cause for concern.

Bunions – enlarged bone or tissue around the joint at the base of the big toe that may sometimes cause it to slant toward the second toe. Although the condition is genetic, most experts believe bunions form as a direct result of wearing too-tight shoes.

Ingrown toenails – cutting toenails straight across so that the corners are not embedded in the skin can help reduce the risk of ingrown toenails. Sharp corners digging into the skin on the side of the toe (usually the big toe) can be quite painful and may become infected if not treated.

Hammer toe – caused by a shortening of the tendons in the second, third or fourth toe, hammer toe is a deformity of the joint causing the toe to bend, resembling a hammer.

Plantar fasciitis – the ligament-like band running between the heel and ball of the foot to support the arch can become unnaturally stretched, which can lead to strain, swelling and inflammation on the soles of your feet. This condition is called plantar fasciitis and is commonly experienced by runners and those who must stand for extended periods of time.

Spurs – those experiencing plantar fasciitis will also often develop heel spurs, which is a calcium deposit in the area on the heel where the ligament has pulled away. This calcium deposit forms a hook-like piece of bone that can be extremely painful when standing.

Gout – known throughout history as the "rich man's disease," gout is an accumulation of needle-shaped crystals around a joint (most often that of the big toe) that are caused by an overabundance of uric acid in the bloodstream. Uric acid is found in rich foods and alcohol that traditionally were only enjoyed by "the rich man" and can bring on attacks of gout.

Peripheral neuropathy – peripheral nerves are those running from the spinal cord to various parts of the body. Those whose feet are experiencing numbness, tingling, a burning or freezing sensation or an extreme sensitivity or lack of feeling to touch may suffer from peripheral neuropathy.

Morton's Neuroma – a buildup of extra tissue in the nerve between the third and fourth toes causes extreme pain due to the constriction and pinching of the nerve.

Plantar warts – under the soles of the feet and growing inward, plantar warts are caused by a virus and can be extremely painful.

Please visit your doctor if you have a sore on your foot that won't heal or becomes infected, if you feel an unusual coldness, cramps, numbness, tingling or discomfort in your feet, if you become less sensitive to foot pain, heat or cold, if the skin on your feet or legs changes colour or if you experience a change in the shape of your foot.