

# Arthritis



**A**rthritis is a common condition, particularly in the elderly, as it is a progressive disease that advances over time. Arthritis is the swelling of joints and can occur anywhere in the body, especially in the feet, affecting range of movement and ability to walk. Arthritis comes in about 100 different forms, with the most common forms affecting the elderly being osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Osteoarthritis is common on older people, as it is a direct result of wear and tear over time, particularly in the feet and knees as they are weight-bearing joints that have endured a huge amount of pressure over a prolonged period. Osteoarthritis is a general breaking down of the joint and usually causes pain and discomfort around the joint. You may also find that your range of movement is less than what it used to be, and your ability to walk could become affected.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune condition that causes the body to work against itself, breaking down joints and resulting in pain, swelling, stiffness and deformity around joints. Rheumatoid arthritis usually presents itself earlier in life, but gets progressively worse over time, making the disease a much bigger problem for older patients. Again, range of movement can be severely affected, as can your ability to walk as toes become deformed and hammer toed, making walking extremely uncomfortable.

Arthritis in the feet can have far-reaching effects on other parts of the feet aside from the affected joints, as your ligaments, tendons and muscles are forced to work harder to maintain stability. This can cause overuse injuries in those ligaments, tendons and muscles, including ankle sprains, torn ligaments and a greater likelihood to fall. Another main concern for over 75s suffering from arthritis is chronic pain, which has huge effects on your overall health as severe pain not only limits movement, but also disturbs sleep and can lead to problems with mental well being and depression.

Treatments are available to alleviate and reduce the symptoms of arthritis. We will carefully assess the severity of the illness and can recommend footwear to give problem joints more room, and therefore reducing the risks of other injuries such as blisters, corns and calluses that can be caused by shoes that rub on swollen areas. Orthotics can also be specially made to provide your feet with extra support and to give you more stability, making it easier to get around. There are also exercises you can do to help to keep the joint moving, which will help to relieve the stiffness and pain you may be feeling. These treatments can greatly improve your quality of life and your general comfort and mobility.

# Bunions

**B**unions are lumps of bone or tissue that form around a joint, usually between the big toe and the base of the foot or in the little toe. While most bunions are genetic and are a problem that affect both young and old, they become worse with age, both in size and severity. As a bunion grows, it impacts on the other toes of the foot, forcing the bones of the other toes into uncomfortable and unnatural angles to accommodate the growth. This can have a huge impact on comfort — particularly as bunions can make wearing shoes very uncomfortable — and on your ability to walk.

At their most benign, bunions cause discomfort and can make shoes feel very tight as the front of the foot is made wider by the growth. If left untreated, bunions can have major complications for overall health by changing the way you walk to compensate for the deformity and by placing increased pressure on other parts of the foot. With the big toe pushed inwards by the bunion, the toe can be forced up and become hammer toed. With toes pushed into un-natural positions other injuries such as blisters, corns and calluses can develop due to rubbing from shoes and the like. These sorts of irritations can easily become infected, leading to more severe problems on top of the problem of the bunion itself.

Treatment is available to reduce and remove bunions. Caught early, bunion growth can be slowed by the fitting of an orthotic device to provide support for the foot and ease the pressure on the problem joint. Shoes with a wider width than what you are used to may also be recommended to allow the joint more room if the bunion has grown to a point where it is uncomfortable in your usual shoes. A wider shoe will release pressure on the joint and slow the growth of the bunion. In a lot of elderly patients, bunions will have progressed beyond the helpfulness of orthotics, in which case surgery is also an option.



## 100,000 miles: podiatry and the elderly

By the age of 80, the average person will have walked approximately 100,000 miles. That's a fair bit of wear and tear on the feet that are carrying you! Foot problems are a huge concern for elderly patients and injuries or complications with the feet and ankles can have serious implications for people in this age group. After the age of 75, small cuts or blisters can easily become serious infections; minor bone abnormalities can develop into serious deformities and foot problems increase the likelihood of falls resulting in major injury.

With age, skin becomes increasingly fragile and feet are more prone to injury from changed gait, unstable walking patterns and ill-fitting shoes, all of which can place extra pressure on easily broken skin. As well as having an increased chance of injury, elderly patients have a harder time recovering from infection. The immune system is slower to respond and infections can quickly get out of control, with the ability to turn a tiny blister into a dangerous abscess.

Nail care is another major concern for the elderly that can have a big impact on foot health. Difficulties bending down

can make trimming nails a tricky proposition and as nails thicken with age they are also harder and require more strength to cut them, which can be problematic as strength also diminishes. Poor eyesight is another factor crucial to nail care, making it troublesome to see what to cut without accidentally causing additional injury. Ingrown nails can easily become infected, so it's important to have nails carefully trimmed, even if you need to ask for help to get the job done.

Problems with bones and joints — the most prominent being arthritis — are common for patients in this age group and become more severe over time. Swollen joints or bony bunions can be incredibly painful and they can seriously affect your ability to walk, along with adding to the likelihood for falls. Treatments are available for these conditions, both to ease pain and to provide stability.

Proper foot care is fundamental to good overall health for elderly patients, and regular visits are recommended so that minor problems can be assessed and treated before they become serious.

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