

Your Health

Oh, My Aching Feet!

The first signs of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) may show in the feet. Approximately 17% of RA cases do. In patients with long standing disease, foot/ankle conditions can affect up to 90% of sufferers. All areas of the foot can be affected, but 89% of patients have involvement of the forefoot.

Signs that the foot is becoming involved are progressively worsening bunions, hammertoes, swollen joints and painful callus formation in the ball of the foot. Calluses are due to dorsal elevation and eventual dislocation of the joints in the toes, which causes downward pressure on the metatarsal bones. This causes increased force across these bones and leads to a painful condition called metatarsalgia. Other areas of involvement can be the midfoot, hindfoot, or ankle joints, as well as tendon and ligament involvement. Patients can often develop a progressive flatfoot deformity or tendonitis on the arch area. Ankle symptoms usually are pain, swelling and loss of motion.

Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis centers on medical management of the disease process with medications. Acute flare-ups are relieved with rest, splinting of the foot or ankle, brief periods of immobilization then mobilization, and sometimes physical therapy to preserve motion of the involved joints. To relieve pain and support the foot, braces and arch supports are helpful. Inserts with metatarsal padding combined with a rigid soled walking shoe are often helpful in alleviating the chronic pain of RA.

When medical or nonsurgical treatments fail to alleviate pain, surgery becomes a useful option. Surgery for forefoot problems usually includes fusion of the big toe to straighten the toe and alleviate pain. This is usually combined with excision of the painful metatarsal

heads and occasionally some hammertoe procedures. Big toe implants have not been shown to hold up over time and do not effectively restore normal weight-bearing ability to the great toe.

When the midfoot joints or hindfoot joints are involved, surgery usually involves selective fusions of the afflicted joints. Repair and reconstruction of tendon problems can also be performed to correct the foot and improve function.

Two options exist today for people with painful ankle joints: Arthrodesis (i.e., ankle fusion) or total ankle arthroplasty (i.e., ankle joint replacement). Improvements in ankle joint implants and techniques have made replacement a very good option for patients with rheumatoid arthritis. In this procedure, the arthritic ankle joint is replaced with a metal and plastic joint just like in hip and knee replacements. Both procedures help restore function and alleviate pain. The procedure of choice varies with each patient and is based on their age, function and size, radiographs of the ankle, and assessment of adequate bone stock for support of the implant.

Regardless of the specific surgical options, it is important for people experiencing chronic foot pain to know that they do not have to suffer. Both nonoperative and operative treatments are readily available to them and will help alleviate those "dam, aching feet."

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