

Common Forefoot Issues: Arthritis, Bunions, and Hammertoes

By David Kay, MD

Over time, our feet take a real beating. Just think about how essential your feet are to standing and walking. And the miles they carry you over a lifetime. So, it's no wonder that as we age, we can become more susceptible to developing conditions that affect these hard-working "dogs."

Arthritis

One of the most common conditions that can affect the foot and ankle is arthritis. Arthritis occurs when cartilage -- the smooth, gliding tissue -- wears away from the joint surface. This can happen as a result of injury, aging, or overuse.

Symptoms of arthritis include pain with motion and at rest, and swelling. Arthritis that affects the middle of the foot can cause the arch to drop down. If it afflicts the big toe, the toe can get stuck in an unnatural position. In extreme cases, people may not want to walk or move at all due to the pain.

Once diagnosed, your doctor may initially recommend non-surgical approaches like activity modification, wearing proper fitting shoes, arch supports, cortisone injections, or anti-inflammatories like Advil® or Aleve®.

Should those options be ineffective, surgery may be considered. For some candidates, ankle replacement surgery could be the next step. For others, ankle fusion, which permanently stiffens the ankle, may be in order.

Bunions

Another condition that affects the forefoot is a bunion. Bunions are bony bumps that develop on the big toe where the big toe starts to cross over and bump into the second toe. Inheritance plays a strong role in the development of bunions, but they can also be aggravated by wearing poor-fitting shoes.

While there are nonsurgical options to address bunions, the only way to correct them is with surgery. Surgery entails realigning the bones so that they're in the correct position, resulting in the front of the foot being made narrower. For the past five years, a less invasive procedure has been perfected that provides an effective correction to the bunion deformity.

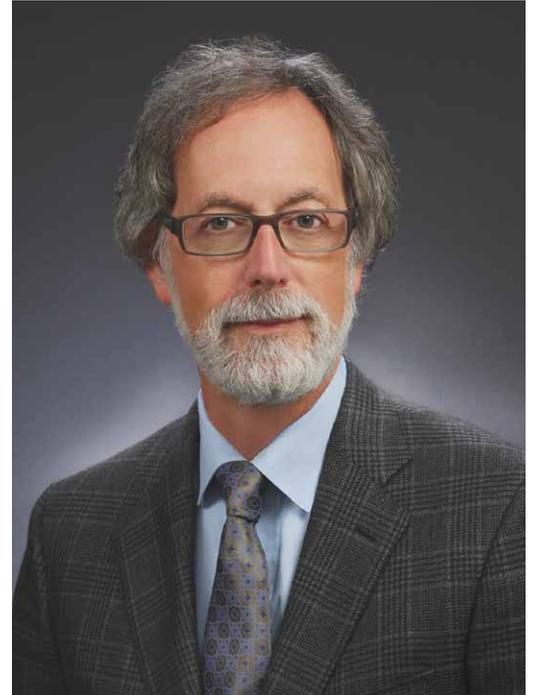
Hammertoe (aka Claw Toe)

Hammertoe is another forefoot issue that can occur as we age. As the name suggests, the toe(s) become crooked where they're bent, causing them to rub at the tops of shoes. While hammertoe can be inherited, more often, it happens as a result of the small muscles in the foot becoming unbalanced or overpowered by the larger muscles. It can also be caused by wearing poor-fitting shoes.

Once diagnosed, your doctor may suggest non-surgical options such as wearing small splints to pull the toes downward, wearing shoes that don't allow the toes to rub, or using pads on the toes for protection.

Should those approaches not work, surgery may be necessary to adjust the ligaments and tendons so the toes straighten. Small implants can also hold toes in position and can frequently avoid having pins stick out of the toes.

At Crystal Clinic, our foot and ankle surgeons are all board-certified and fellowship-trained. Due to our specialized training, we know the best non-surgical and surgical treatments for these and many other foot and ankle conditions. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss your concerns and get you back to enjoying your favorite activities.



Dr. Kay is a board-certified, fellowship-trained orthopaedic surgeon who specializes in foot and ankle conditions. He is also a professor of orthopaedic surgery at Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED). Dr. Kay is affiliated with a number of professional orthopaedic organizations and has held several teaching appointments. He has been a physician since 1980 and is a member of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.



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