

Common Foot and Ankle problems

Tibialis Posterior or Adult Flat foot syndrome

This occurs more commonly in women than men and as the name implies, comes on in adult life, usually starting in middle age. The patient presents with heel or inside ankle pain and swelling – sometimes mistaken for plantar fasciitis (under heel pain) – and associated with a fallen arch on the affected foot. There may also be pain in the front of the same knee and back pain on the opposite side of the spine to the affected foot. On examination from behind, the patient stands with the affected foot turned out, so the examiner can see more of their toes than on the other foot. Treatment depends on severity, but may include treatment to reduce pain and swelling, orthotics (prescribed insoles), a brace or in late stages, surgery.



Achilles Tendon. The Achilles tendon is the big tendon at the back of the ankle attaching the calf muscles to the heel bone. This is often seen either in sports people – runner, jumpers and high impact sports – or in elderly patients with degenerative tendons. Treatment will be tailored to the individual and the likely pathology, but it is important that the examiner excludes a rupture (snapped) tendon, as this will require hospital treatment, of either an operation or a plaster boot. Interestingly a completely ruptured tendon is often not very painful and the patient complains more of a feeling of having been hit/shot in the back of their calf and now the foot is “floppy”. Once it is established that the tendon is intact, options may involve initially raising the heel to reduce the stretch on the tendon. This can be done with a heel insert, but in ladies, the easy answer is to put a pair of chunky heels on for the first few days! Ice and anti-inflammatories may be useful to reduce swelling and pain, and then stretching, strengthening, activity modification and footwear advice will all be involved in the rehabilitation. The tendon requires load to strengthen, so slow heel descents off the edge of a step may be prescribed, for example.

Fractures /broken ankles

Commonly caused by a fall off a small step or kerb. There will be pain weight-bearing, with swelling and bruising appearing over the course of a few days in the foot or even the toes. If

in doubt, seek an Xray, as this will require treatment with plaster or a “stormtrooper” boot. In worst cases, the bones will need to be plated together in an operation.



Bunions are very common and usually caused more by foot type than by bad footwear, although this can be a factor. This occurs where the big toe drifts inwards and leaves the outside big toe joint exposed to pressure from shoes. If the bunion is late stage, the answer is usually surgery. Caught earlier, good quality orthotics and shoes, stretches and exercises can produce good results, and reduce pain and progression of this painful condition.

In children

The most common cause of ankle pain is a twisted ankle causing **ligament sprains**. As children grow, their bones grow before their muscles, so the muscles and tendons are stretched by the elongating bones and balance becomes poor. This is particularly noticeable in 12-14 year old boys, who are also a very sporty demographic so are more prone to injury. As the ankle turns, the ligaments holding the bones together become over stretched and torn. It is important in cases of bruising or pain over the bones themselves, that the ankle is X-rayed to exclude a fractured bone, or an avulsion, where the ligament is so tightly bound to the bone that rather than the ligament spraining, it actually pulls a bit of bone away with the attachment. Clear diagnosis will dictate the recovery time, but in adults and older adolescents, recovery of a bad sprain will take up to 6 weeks whereas children often recover in about 4 weeks. Ice, taping, crutches if needed, with gentle exercises to regain movement, balance and strength before a staged return to sport will all be addressed.

Severs Disease is the equivalent of Osgood Schlatter’s in the knee (see last month’s article!) where the Achilles attaches to the heel bone and becomes locally painful and inflamed due to pulling on the bony attachment due to growth. Off- loading the tendon attachment and gentle calf muscle stretches to reduce the pulling pressure on the attachment will ease the problem. Orthotics may be of use in some of these children too.