



TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING OSTEOARTHRITIS IN YOUR FEET AND ANKLES

Osteoarthritis can affect your ankle joint, also the foot joint directly under your ankle joint (the subtalar joint) and the joints of your toes, especially the big toe joint where it joins your foot (your first metatarsophalangeal joint).

Common problems associated with osteoarthritis in the feet:

- Pain – particularly with bending or weight-bearing activities such as walking or running.
- Stiffness – especially in the morning (lasting for less than 30 minutes) or if you haven't moved in a while.
- Loss of flexibility and movement.
- A crackling or grating feeling.

Your feet support your body weight, so it's not surprising if you experience pain or discomfort in this area.

The risk of developing osteoarthritis in your feet is commonly linked to:

- **Being overweight** - one of the best ways to take pressure off painful ankles and feet is to lose excess body weight.
- **Joint injuries** – a bone fracture or cartilage damage can lead to OA.
- **Your genes** – people with family members who have OA are more likely to develop it.
- **Age and female gender.**

Should I see a doctor?

You should talk to your doctor or other health professional if your pain or symptoms bother you. They will ask you about your symptoms and examine you. Often osteoarthritis can be diagnosed without needing further tests. Sometimes an X-ray or blood test is needed if it is not clear what the cause of your symptoms is.

Managing osteoarthritis of the foot and ankle

Exercise and movement - exercise is essential to keep your joints moving. However, you may need to try different types of exercise if you have painful feet. There are two main types of exercise to try.

Stretching exercises – can help maintain and improve the range of movement of your joints.

Each foot is made up of 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments, which work together to provide support, balance and mobility!



Anatomy of the foot and ankle. (Picture courtesy of Allan McGavin Sports Medicine Centre patient handouts)

Strengthening exercises - help keep your muscles, tendons and ligaments strong to support the bones at the joints.

Cycling, swimming, aqua aerobics, yoga and Tai Chi are types of exercise which are good to try.

Footwear - your feet should be warm and comfortable. Wear socks which fit smoothly inside your shoes. Shoes should be supportive but not too stiff. They should hold your feet firmly in place. Your shoes should support your arches, using cushioned insoles if needed. Avoid high heels and jandals.

Podiatrists specialise in conditions affecting the feet, such as arthritis. You can be referred to a podiatrist by your doctor, but service is very restricted in most areas. Or you can pay to see one privately. You don't need a referral letter for this. Either way, you should check that they are registered with the NZ Podiatrists Board - www.podiatristsboard.org.nz

Your podiatrist can help you with:

- Advice.
- Strapping your feet for short periods to limit how much you move painful joints.
- provide padding or shields for your feet and toes to reduce pressure and friction in shoes.
- Provide insoles or inserts to go in your shoes to support your feet.

Physiotherapists help with assistive devices such as canes and walkers. You can use a cane on the side opposite to the painful joint. Your doctor can refer you.

Pain Relief

Heat and cold - applying heat, such as a hot pack (microwaveable wheat pack), heating pad or hot water bottle, to stiff, painful joints may help. If your joints are hot and swollen, applying an ice pack may help. Try using heat or cold on the painful area for 15 minutes. Always have a layer (such as a tea towel) between your skin and the heat or ice pack. You can repeat this whenever you need to throughout the day. Make sure the skin temperature returns to normal in between applying heat or ice packs to prevent skin damage.



Pacing - pace your activities by spreading tasks over a day or week, rather than doing things all in one go or until you feel tired.

Creams - applying creams or ointments to the skin in the affected area may help control pain. In particular, creams containing anti-inflammatory medicines or capsaicin (an ingredient in cayenne and chilli peppers) may be helpful. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about these creams.

Medication - several medications can be used to treat osteoarthritis in the feet and ankles. Paracetamol is a good medication to start with. Your doctor or pharmacist can help you understand which medication is right for you and how best to use it, as even natural and over-the-counter drugs have side effects.

Surgery - surgery for the feet and ankles will only be considered if other treatments haven't worked. Talk to your doctor if you think you may need to go down this route.