What's Behind Rheumatoid Arthritis Foot Pain?

Foot and ankle problems are extremely common in people who have rheumatoid arthritis. Find out what causes rheumatoid arthritis foot pain and how best to manage symptoms.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a destructive form of arthritis that attacks the joints of the body, including those of the hands, wrists, feet, and ankles. Most people who have rheumatoid arthritis eventually develop pain in their feet and ankles. In some cases, foot pain is the first sign that someone may have rheumatoid arthritis.

Symptoms usually appear in the toes, progress to the heel and back of the feet, and then up to the ankles. The most common symptoms include pain, a feeling of stiffness, and swelling.
Rheumatoid arthritis foot pain usually affects both feet. In some cases, the toes can curl up and stiffen, a condition called hammertoe or clawtoe. If the back of the foot or ankle is affected, the arch of the foot can collapse, causing pain and difficulty walking.

While doctors do not yet know what causes rheumatoid arthritis, they know that rheumatoid arthritis can exacerbate the normal pressures on your joints — and keep in mind that the feet and ankles bear the body's weight, all day, every day.

Similar to heat softening up metal before it can be molded, rheumatoid arthritis gets joints hot and angry, which accelerates the normal wear and tear on the joints. But just why the feet and ankles are so badly affected remains unknown.

**Rheumatoid Arthritis Foot Pain: Symptoms Management**

When it comes to controlling the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis foot pain, the primary goal is to get the inflammation under control. Treatment may include:

**Physical therapy.** Stretching and exercise, done under the guidance of a doctor or physical therapist, can be extremely important for improving rheumatoid arthritis foot pain and increasing mobility.

**Splinting.** Your doctor may suggest wearing a splint to keep the foot or ankle immobilized during the day and perhaps at night. A splint can help relieve rheumatoid arthritis foot pain and give the foot or ankle joints a chance to rest and speed recovery.

**Assistive devices.** In cases where the toes have
begun to curl or the feet have developed arch problems, doctors may recommend special shoes designed to alleviate rheumatoid arthritis foot pain and give extra needed support. Depending on the severity of the rheumatoid arthritis and mobility problems, your doctor may suggest a cane or crutches, or another type of assistive device.

**Heat or ice.** Heat can help release tense muscles and help decrease stiffness in joints. Applying an ice pack to an inflamed area can help ease rheumatoid arthritis foot pain.

**Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.** Doctors may suggest over-the-counter drugs such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve), or more potent prescription anti-inflammatory medicines. These medications can make a tremendous difference, controlling inflammation and reducing swelling.

**Surgery.** In some patients, surgery may be recommended as an option to relieve rheumatoid arthritis foot pain. A *total ankle replacement* (also called ankle arthroplasty) is a surgical option for patients with arthritis of the ankle. This operation can relieve pain and maintain motion in the arthritic ankle joint and is an alternative to arthrodesis (ankle fusion) which can relieve pain but eliminates motion in the joint. Surgery can correct hammertoes or *bunions*. Doctors may also perform a procedure called a fusion, in which the joint cartilage is removed and the bones are held together with screws, plates, or a rod. Doctors may also implant a bone graft taken from the hip or a leg. As time passes, the bones will fuse together, and rheumatoid arthritis foot pain will be greatly reduced (although range of motion may also be reduced).
On February 5th we were invited to the Go Red for Native Women event hosted by the American Heart Association at the Downtown Hyatt Regency. We always enjoy educating our community about their foot and ankle health and welcome every opportunity to do so.

Current blogs on our website:

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