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Hand-Out

-How to Take Care of Your Arthritic Feet at Home-

07/15/14

Knowledge is power, and this hand-out offers you tips on how to keep your arthritic feet as comfortable as possible to be able to enjoy physical activity to your fullest potential!

Index:

1-Defining the different types of arthritis that you can suffer from	p. 02
2-Explaining how arthritis can affect your feet.....	p. 03
3-Finding appropriate cushioning for the feet.....	p. 04
4-Finding the right shoes.....	p. 05
5-Needing inserts or orthotics for the shoes.....	p. 05
6-Exercises you can do for arthritic feet.....	p. 05
7-Medications for arthritic feet.....	p. 06
8-Alternative ways to reduce pain and stiffness in arthritic feet.....	p. 06
9-Best diet for arthritic feet.....	p. 07
10-Nail care and skin care for arthritic feet.....	p. 07
11-References and links.....	p. 07



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1-Defining the different types of arthritis that you can suffer from:

There are two kinds of arthritis. Both are associated with pain and joint swelling.

- The inflammatory kind causes inflammation of the synovial capsule membrane that surrounds your joints, resulting in destruction of bone. The joint swelling is due to the inflammation.
- The non-inflammatory kind starts with breakdown of the cartilage in a joint, usually a weight-bearing joint, resulting in bone rubbing on bone, and new bone growth in the body's attempt to repair the damage. The joint swelling is due to the extra bone growth.

There are different signs and symptoms for the two kinds of arthritis:

- Inflammatory arthritis causes bone destruction; pain at rest; long periods of stiffness after rest; warm, red, and swollen joints; and often body-wide symptoms, like fatigue, loss of appetite, weight loss, skin rashes, and fevers.
- Non-inflammatory arthritis causes new bone formation; little or no pain at rest; only short periods of stiffness after rest; only minimal warmth and redness around the joints; rarely any systemic symptoms.

There are several types of each of the two kinds of arthritis:

- Rheumatoid arthritis is the most common type of inflammatory-arthritis. It usually affects the small joints of the hands and feet, such as the joints of the fingers and toes. Gross deformities develop in the fingers and toes. The arthritis causes hammertoes and bunions and bony joints in the metatarsal pad due to destruction of the fat padding, resulting in painful ulcers.



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- Psoriatic arthritis is a lesser common type of inflammatory arthritis. The inflammation usually happens in the toe joints. It causes severe swelling and pain in the toes, and there is also a lot of bone destruction in the toes. The swollen toes are often called “sausage digits.”
- Gout can turn into inflammatory arthritis. Gout is caused by too much uric acid in the body; either because the body produces too much, or because the kidneys are unable to eliminate it fast enough. Uric acid does not mix easily with fluids, but turns into urate crystals, instead. The urate crystals often settle in the first joint of the great toe and cause acute gout attacks with swelling, a deep red color, and very severe pain. After the acute attack of gout in the great toe, some of the urate crystals may remain embedded in the joint cartilage and cause a chronic inflammatory arthritis with chronic swelling and pain.
- Osteoarthritis is the most common type of non-inflammatory arthritis. Primary osteoarthritis is usually genetic and often affects only the joints of the fingers. Secondary osteoarthritis, on the other hand, is not genetic, but rather caused by wear and tear. It often affects the thumb joint, hip joint, knee joint, and for ballet dancers also the ankle joint. Any malpositioning of a joint in the foot can also cause osteoarthritis, such as at the site of a bunion or a hammertoe. An injury to a bone anywhere in the body may also cause extra bone growth in the body's attempt to repair itself.

2-Explaining how arthritis can affect your feet:

Inflammatory arthritis causes red, swollen, and painful joints. The joints often have very sharp, bony points that put the overlying tissue at high risk for ulcer formation. Examples are hammertoes rubbing against the top or end of a shoe or bony joints on the metatarsal pad rubbing against the insole of the shoe.



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Non-inflammatory arthritis also causes swollen joints, but this is due to extra bone growth, rather than inflammation. The swollen joint will be big, but the surface will be smooth without any sharp points. Any resulting pressure from a shoe will be more evenly distributed over the entire area of the swollen joint. The chance for ulcer formation is lessened, compared to inflammatory arthritis, due to the smoother surface with less sharp points and lesser pressure in one particular area.

In addition to ulcer formation, both kinds of arthritis cause aches, pains, and stiffness. The severity is usually higher in the inflammatory kind of arthritis.

3-Finding appropriate cushioning for the feet:

Pressure points on the feet can be cushioned to minimize ulcers and pain.

- A thick, soft sock with no irritating seams will cushion the whole entire foot.
- Lambs wool can be wrapped around bony toe joints.
- Soft foam or gel sleeves with an open end or closed end can be slipped over the toes. If the end is closed, the tip of the toe is also protected.
- Toe separators of felt or foam can be placed between the toes.
- A hammertoe crest can be placed under the toes to lift them up and prevent the tip of the toes from rubbing in the sole of the shoe.
- Adhesive felt disks can be placed on the sole of the foot. The area of the disk that fits over the protruding bone is cut out in order to redistribute the pressure to the surrounding area.
- A bunion protector will also have a hole cut out at the site of the bunion to redistribute the pressure to the surrounding area.



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See my hand-out on foot-care supplies.

4-Finding the right shoes:

Shoes need to be big enough in the areas of swelling. Such shoes are often difficult to find, so an alternative is to find shoes that are made of a soft fabric that stretches and gives to avoid undue pressure on the swollen bony points of the feet. Ideally, you'll find a shoe that is both big enough and made of a soft, stretchy material for the most comfort.

See my hand-outs on how to buy the right shoes and places to buy shoes.

5-Needing inserts or orthotics for the shoes:

Soft inserts can be used to cushion the bony points on the soles of the feet. If orthotics are needed to correct the gait, it may be nice to have indentations for the areas of bony points and/or a soft cushion as the top layer. However, you'll need to use the expertise of the person fabricating the orthotics for the best product that suits you needs the most.

See my hand-out on inserts and orthotics.

6-Exercises you can do for arthritic feet:

Moving the arthritic joints of your feet gently can both increase flexibility and decrease stiffness. All the below exercises are non-weight-bearing and can be done sitting or lying.

- Pump your foot gently up and down at the ankle joint.
- Rotate your foot gently in circles at the ankle joint, both to the left and right.



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- Flex your toes gently up and down.
- Bend and stretch your toes gently.
- Spread and close your toes gently.

7-Medications for arthritic feet:

Pain medications are often given to control the pain of non-inflammatory arthritis. Tylenol, or similar drugs, for mild pain or opioids for more severe pain are often used.

Anti-inflammatory medications are usually given for inflammatory arthritis; both to control the inflammation, but also to control the pain.

There are a variety of medications available by prescription and over-the-counter.

Some side effects are mild and some are severe. The person affected by severe pain usually has to accept the side effects to get adequate relief from the pain; and, some times this is a difficult task.

8-Alternative ways to reduce pain and stiffness in arthritic feet:

A warm hydrotherapy bath, a hot wax service, a gentle foot massage, or a gentle application of soothing lotion or cream on the feet are all ways to temporarily relieve pain and stiffness in arthritic feet.



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9-Best diet for arthritic feet (and body):

You should have two goals with your diet:

- Try to maintain a proper body weight to avoid excessive wear and tear on your weight-bearing joints to avoid non-inflammatory osteo arthritis.
- Try to avoid foods that can trigger a body wide inflammation or exacerbate inflammatory joints in inflammatory arthritis.

See my hand-outs on: improving your health, well-being, and happiness; and on which recipes are healthy, tasty, and easy.

10-Nail care and skin care for arthritic feet:

Nail care and skin care should be done with a gentle touch. You may need professional help for nail and skin problems that can't be dealt with at home. It doesn't hurt to remind the professional to be as gentle as possible.

11-References and links:

My most important inspiration for this hand-out is “The Salon professional's guide to Foot Care” by Godfrey Mix, published by Milady SalonOvations in 1999.

The following hand-outs from my web-site provide additional information:

- How to buy the right shoes and socks.
- How to determine if you need orthotics or shoe modifications.
- Where to buy shoes, socks, and foot care supplies.
- How to improve your health, well-being, and happiness.
- Which recipes are healthy, tasty, and easy; (using non-inflammatory foods.)