

# The Geriatric Foot

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It is predicted that due to advances in general health care, life expectancy will continue to advance. The normal aging process of the body will result in concurrent adaptations and changes consistent with this overall process.

The most common foot problems seen in the geriatric population appear to be obvious. These include: corns, callouses, nail and skin complaints.

Although not always visible, underlying problems such as arthritis, vascular disease and diabetes mellitus can present primarily with the signs and symptoms in the lower extremities and feet.

As we age, the normal ability for the skin to retain moisture is altered and the natural padding present as fat, in particular, the soles of our feet can become less effective and in many instances, a diminution of the cushioning effect upon the underlying bony prominences can occur.

Excessive stress from shoe gear and walking can cause these underlying bony structures to become more prominent and cause friction in closed shoe gear. As a result, the body attempts to "pad" these areas by forming thickened skin - "corns and callouses" (reactive hyperkeratosis) which has a lower moisture content and can appear hard, thickened and cause pain in shoe gear. They are usually exacerbated by underlying structural deformities that progress with age such as a hammer toe or enlargement of the bones in the feet from arthritis or biomechanical aberrations.

Thickening of the toe nails is a common complaint seen in the aging population. Although it can be commonly associated with damage to the growth mechanism to the nail bed, for example, from blunt trauma or tight shoes. It is not uncommon to diagnose underlying disorders associated with fungal/yeast infections, peripheral vascular disease of the lower extremities (poor circulation), diabetes mellitus, poor nutrition, lung disorders and even psoriasis.

Treatment consists of proper evaluation by the podiatric surgeon through a thorough history and examination of the vascular, neurologic, orthopaedic and dermatologic parameters of the lower extremities. Usually, local care by reduction of the thickened nails and "hyperkeratosis" can reduce the discomfort caused by the excessive pressure in shoe gear. However, if symptoms persist, treatment through medical or surgical care can remedy many of these common problems. Today, many of these common complaints can be treated in the office or through the Ambulatory Surgical Unit at Huntington Hospital with little discomfort or upset of daily routines.

Those not amenable to surgical care can accommodate painful callouses through prescription foot wear and "arch supports". These modern "arch supports" are called orthotics and can be personally fabricated by an orthotist through a prescription by your podiatrist and

can even be made to accommodate a lady's dress shoe.

Common sense is the key to health and healthy feet. Simple things such as moisturizing your feet with an over-the-counter skin lotion can soften dead tissue and prevent the excessive evaporation of moisture in the feet of the elderly.

A routine of steady but mild exercise, such as a walking program, can help the circulation of the lower extremity. However, discuss any exercise regimen with your family doctor before starting.

Wash and inspect your feet daily. Excessive wetness between the toes can promote a fungus infection (athlete's foot) that can lead to serious infections in the compromised patient.

Cut your toe nails short and often. Those with diabetes, poor vision, circulatory problems, obesity or arthritis should periodically see a podiatrist for routine foot care.

Never walk barefooted or use excessive hot (heating pads) or cold packs to the feet. Avoid over-the-counter "corn" and "ingrown" toenail medications. These usually contain an acid that leads to a more serious problem in a compromised patient.

Take care of minor foot complaints before they are a problem!

Using common sense and practicing everyday hygiene should help you avoid painful foot problems.

Healthy feet that are well maintained should last a long lifetime!

