



Podiatry

Podiatrists are specially trained practitioners who have a special interest in the foot and ankle. Their main aim is to ensure that you have a good walking action which may have been altered by pain or structural changes to the foot and ankle. As part of this treatment they will advise on what footwear is most appropriate for your needs. Ill-fitting shoes or trainers that cause callus formation are to be discouraged and to find something more suitable. They also treat and advise on nail-bed infections and local skin conditions.

Podiatrists will make an assessment, then advise and treat you to ensure good skin quality and pay attention to the nail-beds, as it is important to prevent nail damage, infection and pain. This is particularly important if you have poor circulation or have reduced sensation in your feet as can occur with Diabetes.

The way the foot moves, often called 'biomechanics' is also crucial. The feet need to be supported so that the natural arches of the foot are optimised. This may involve producing an 'orthotic'. This shaped insert is placed into the shoe, restoring the shape of the underneath part of the foot. It also may help with spreading the load and energy through the foot when walking. This is called 'shock attenuation'.

Podiatrists are very much involved in the treatment of mechanical pain in particular that affects the lower half of the body. A bad walking action can put strain on the knees, hips and lower spine, storing up trouble for the future. Usually they will make an assessment of the problem by taking a history of the problem, for example:

- How did it start?
- What exactly is the problem?
- What did you do?
- Is there pain?
- Where is the pain?
- What makes it worse?
- Do you do a lot of sport or exercise?

Then they will examine you to look for:

- Loss of the natural arches of the foot or 'flat feet'
- Poor or abnormal walking action often called 'gait analysis'
- Muscle spasm
- Muscle weakness

- Abnormal movement patterns
- Abnormalities of ankle movement
- Joint instability or stiffness
- Infection of the skin or nail-beds

Whilst you are with the therapist they may employ techniques to bring immediate relief:

- Trimming nails or hard skin
- Hands-on manipulation or massage
- A temporary orthotic

They may advise on:

- Appropriate footwear
- Foot exercises
- Improvements to your walking action
- If the temporary orthotic is helpful they may recommend a permanent bespoke orthotic for long term use
- Progressing to or back to sporting activity in a graduated fashion

All podiatrists use various techniques to make their assessment and then be in a position to offer advice and treatment. The treatment is naturally to help with the primary problem. It is important to note that the correction of problems with the foot and ankle are important also for the long term. By allowing a normal, balanced walking action then this has potentially beneficial effects for the knees, hips and spine.

If you are not walking correctly, then unnecessary strain can be put through the joints causing premature wear and tear. Secondary muscle tension causing further aches and pains may result. In the more severe cases the damage to the joints may result in them being replaced. Poor spine posture and low back can be avoided with these measures too.

If orthotics are used as part of your treatment, these should be reviewed and re-assessed every 2 to 3 years.