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Information Sheet

SWELLINGS OF THE FEET

There are a number of common swellings that can occur in the foot.

- Bunions – this is a bony swelling on the inner side of the big toe metatarsal head. There may also be a soft, fluid filled bursa overlying this. This swelling usually occurs in conjunction with hallux valgus (see section on hallux valgus)
- Osteophytes – these are small bony lumps that occur around arthritic joints. The most common site in the foot is around the joint at the base of the big toe (see section on Hallux Rigidus). They can, however, occur around any of the joints of the foot.
- Bunionette - this is a swelling on the outer side of the metatarsal head of the small toe. Symptoms occur as a result of shoes rubbing on the prominent bone. It is also known as a tailor's bunion, as tailors used to sit on a hard wooden table with their legs crossed. If symptoms are troublesome, a small surgical procedure can be performed to remove the swelling. This involves cutting the bone (an osteotomy) in a similar manner to that performed in bunion surgery.
- Ganglion – this is a benign, cystic swelling that arises from the tendons or joints of the foot. They can be painful if prominent, as they can rub on footwear or irritate surrounding tendons. Occasionally, an aching pain is present as a result of the pressure in the cyst. They can be treated non surgically and will occasionally disappear spontaneously. Traditionally, bursting them with a family bible has been recommended, although this is usually painful and the recurrence rates are high! Removing fluid with a needle under local anaesthetic can also be attempted, although again, this carries a high recurrence rate. Surgery to remove the swelling by excising it to its origin at either the joint capsule or tendon sheath can be performed as a day case and gives the best chance of preventing a recurrence of the swelling. Despite a thorough surgical excision, the ganglion can still recur in the future.
- Tarsal boss – this is a normal bony swelling on the top of the foot. It can grow with you from childhood. If troublesome inside shoes it can be removed surgically.
- Accessory bones in the foot – these are small extra bones that can be found at a number of sites around the foot. They often lie in the substance of tendons. If they cause pain they can be surgically removed.
- Plantar fibromatosis - This is a condition caused by nodules of thickened scar on the sole of the foot. It is closely related to Dupuytren's contracture in the hand. Unlike in the hand, however, where contracture of the fingers occurs, on the sole of the foot it simply causes tender nodules, but without the contracture. If the nodules are troublesome and painful they may be eased by steroid injection. In rare cases, we will consider surgical removal of the nodules. There is, however, a risk that the swellings can recur.
- Corns and calluses - these swellings are caused by pressure between the bones of the foot and footwear, or by direct pressure between the bones of the toes. Treatment may be required to either remove or realign the bony prominence to prevent further pressure.
- Benign tumours - the foot is an occasional site for benign growths of various types. If symptomatic, they can be removed with surgery. It is very rare for the foot to be a site for cancerous swellings.