

Information Sheet

SESAMOID PAIN

What are the Sesamoid bones?

The sesamoid bones are two small bones that lie under the base of the big toe. Their role is to transfer weight from the body to the floor.

What problems can they cause?

The main symptom is pain. This occurs under the big toe when standing, walking or running. There are a number of causes of sesamoid pain – these are detailed below:

- Sesamoid fractures – these can either be acute fractures after sudden injury or may be stress fractures after repetitive injury such as running. It can be difficult to tell a fracture from a bipartite sesamoid. This is a normal finding in many patients and occurs when the bone forms in two parts. MRI and CT scans may be helpful in differentiating the two. Treatment of sesamoid fractures is usually rest and the use of orthotic insoles. Occasionally, it is possible to fix the fracture with a small screw. If this fails, it may be necessary to remove the sesamoid – a sesamoidectomy.
- Sesamoiditis – this is inflammation of the sesamoid that causes fragmentation of the bone (see picture, right). As for stress fractures, this can occur after repetitive injury such as in certain sports. Again, the initial treatment is non-surgical, with the use of insoles and occasionally injections. If this treatment fails, the sesamoid may need to be removed to resolve symptoms.
- Sesamoid arthritis - the sesamoids form a joint with the metatarsal head above. Like all joints in the body, this joint can become arthritic (see picture, right). If conservative treatments such as steroid injections or insoles fail to relieve symptoms, then again removal of the sesamoid can be performed.



What is the recovery after sesamoidectomy?

The surgery is performed as a day case under general anaesthetic. This is usually combined with a local anaesthetic to relieve the post-operative pain. You can walk with weight through your heel only for the first two weeks. At this point, the wound is checked and any sutures removed. It can, however, take a couple of months for swelling to settle and to get back to normal walking and driving.

Are there any complications of sesamoidectomy?

There are risks with all surgical procedures. Risks of severe complications are increased in heavy smokers and diabetics with poor sugar control. Surgery is performed under a general anaesthetic with local nerve block. With modern techniques, the risk from the general anaesthetic itself is now very low and the small risks from the nerve block include nerve damage and bleeding. There are also general risks of the surgery, which include infection, pain, swelling, stiffness, blood clots, nerve and blood vessel damage and a risk that the surgery may not fully cure the pain.

Specific to sesamoidectomy is a risk that a malalignment of the big toe can occur. This can be a difficult complication to treat and may necessitate fusion of the big toe joint if very troublesome.