Metatarsalgia (Forefoot Pain)

Pain in the ball of your foot, the area between your arch and the toes, is called metatarsalgia (met'-a-tar-sal'-gee-a). The pain usually centers on one or more of the five bones (metatarsals) in this area under the toes.

What causes foot pain?

Sometimes pain is caused by a callus that forms on the bottom of your foot. A callus is a buildup of skin that forms in response to excessive pressure over the bone. Normally a callus is not painful, but the buildup of skin can increase pressure and eventually make walking difficult.

Shoes that don't fit properly can cause foot pain. Tight shoes squeeze the foot and increase pressure; loose shoes let the foot slide and rub, which creates friction.

Pain on the underside of the foot may indicate a torn ligament or inflammation of the joint. An orthopaedic foot and ankle specialist can do some simple tests to assess joint stability.

How is foot pain treated?

Most of the time, practical measures can help ease foot pain.

• Your doctor may recommend that you use a shoe insert (arch support) as a kind of shock absorber, or that you wear a different kind of shoe.

• Sometimes, simply buying shoes that fit properly can solve the problem. Shoes should have a wide toe box that doesn't cramp your toes. Heels should never be higher than 2 1/4” high.

• Soaking your feet to soften calluses and then removing some of the dead skin with a pumice stone or callus file will also ease pressure. Note, however, that diabetics should not do this themselves. Calluses should be taken care of by your physician or someone your physician recommends for taking care of diabetic feet.

• Occasionally, surgery may be necessary to remove a bony prominence or correct a deformity.

This material was co-developed by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

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