Pain on Top of the Foot

Understanding symptoms, treatment and recovery

Pain on Top of the Foot

A guide to symptoms, treatment and recovery



Understanding pain on top of the foot

Pain on the top (dorsum) of the foot can be caused by injury, overuse, or underlying conditions affecting the bones, joints, tendons, or nerves.

Supporting your recovery

Comfortable, supportive footwear and changes to activities that worsen pain may help. A physiotherapist can tailor exercises to your condition.

Causes and symptoms

Understanding what may be contributing to your pain

Common causes

- Extensor tendonitis - inflammation of the tendons on top of the foot
- Stress fractures - small cracks in the bones due to repetitive impact
- Nerve irritation - compression or entrapment of nerves
- Arthritis - inflammation of the foot joints
- Ganglion cysts - fluid-filled lumps causing pressure and discomfort
- Footwear issues - tight or poorly fitted shoes

Who may be affected?

- Runners or athletes
- People who stand or walk for long periods
- Individuals with high arches or flat feet
- Older adults with arthritis or degenerative changes

Common symptoms

- Pain or tenderness on the top of the foot
- Swelling or redness
- Stiffness or difficulty moving the foot or toes
- Pain during walking, running, or wearing shoes
- Numbness or tingling if nerves are involved

Important information

- Pain does not improve after 1-2 weeks of self-care
- Swelling, bruising, or deformity
- Difficulty walking or performing daily activities
- Persistent numbness, tingling, or weakness
- Suspected stress fracture or nerve problem

Recovery outlook

Most top-of-foot pain improves with conservative care over a few weeks. Early treatment and following exercises reduce the risk of chronic pain or functional problems.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Gentle movements under professional guidance

Exercise examples

Ask your physiotherapist which exercises are suitable for you. Use controlled movements and work within comfort.



Exercise instructions

1. Toe Extension and Flexion: Slowly move toes up and down 10-15 times
2. Towel Scrunches: Pull a towel toward you using your toes, repeat 10-15 times
3. Calf Stretch: Lean against a wall with back leg straight, heel on the ground, hold 20-30 seconds

Recovery guidance

Most top-of-foot pain improves with conservative care over a few weeks. Early treatment and following exercises reduce the risk of chronic pain or functional problems.

Management and next steps

Self-care, treatment and when to seek help

Self-care and home management

- Rest - avoid activities that worsen the pain
- Ice therapy - 10-15 minutes, 2-3 times daily
- Footwear - wear comfortable shoes with good support
- Elevation - raise your foot when resting to reduce swelling
- Pain relief - paracetamol or NSAIDs if safe for you

Treatment physiotherapists may offer

- Hands-on treatment: massage, stretching, mobilization
- Exercise program for strength and flexibility
- Advice on footwear, orthotics, and activity modification
- Taping or splints to support and reduce pressure

Questions or concerns?

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- Swelling, bruising, or deformity
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- Persistent numbness, tingling, or weakness
- Suspected stress fracture or nerve problem

References

- NHS - Foot Pain: www.nhs.uk/conditions/foot-pain
- Chartered Society of Physiotherapy - Foot & Ankle Guidance

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