

Foot and Ankle Arthritis: Non-Operative Treatment

There are a variety of non-operative treatments that may prove helpful in managing arthritis affecting joints of the foot or ankle. A combination of these treatment strategies often works best. Each patient will be the best judge of which treatments work and one often has to try a variety of combinations to see what works best.

Each treatment is designed to do one or more of the following:

- Limit the force going through the foot and ankle joints;
- Limit the movement through the affected foot and ankle joint(s);
- Minimize the pain response.

Non-operative treatment strategies include:

Comfortable Shoes: A stiff sole shoe with a gentle curved (rocker-bottom) contour can absorb shock on impact and help with weight transfer during walking.

Cushioned shock absorbing orthotic: A soft shock-absorbing over-the-counter orthotic when combined with a comfortable shoe will help to absorb the forces that go through the foot and ankle with each step during standing and walking.

Ankle Braces: These can range from a lace-up brace to a medical walking boot to a custom ankle brace. All ankle braces are designed to limit ankle and hindfoot motion.

Cane: Used in the opposite hand (ex. cane goes in the left hand if your right ankle has arthritis) a cane will decrease the force that is felt through the foot and ankle joints with walking. It also improves balance which can make walking easier.

Weight Loss: Each 5 lbs of weight loss lessens foot and ankle joint stresses by 10-15 lbs/step.

Physical Therapy or Home exercise programs: Exercises designed to keep the joints from getting stiff and keeping muscles that control the foot and ankle strong can be helpful. Therapists can also often suggest ways to perform activities that are less stressful on the joints.

Activity modification: Find creative ways to lessen standing/steps or exercise triggers which cause more joint pain.

Anti-Inflammatory Medication (NSAIDs): Both over-the-counter and prescription NSAIDs may be helpful. Used on a cyclic basis NSAIDs can help joint pain and include oral and topical NSAID agents. (Discuss with your physician before starting)

Acetaminophen (ex. Tylenol): Can also provide pain relief, but patients with liver problems should avoid this medication and it is important to take only the amount instructed.

Corticosteroid Injections. Injection of corticosteroid medication into the arthritic joint reduces inflammation/pain and can be effective for 3-6 months.