



Foot conditions

Your questions answered

Q. What are musculoskeletal conditions?

A. Musculoskeletal conditions affect the muscles, bones and/or joints. There are over 150 different types, including [osteoarthritis](#), [back pain](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [fibromyalgia](#), [gout](#), [polymyalgia rheumatica](#), [lupus](#), [osteoporosis](#) and [ankylosing spondylitis](#).

Anyone can get a musculoskeletal condition, including [children](#). They affect people from all backgrounds and lifestyles. In fact, around 7 million Australians report having a musculoskeletal condition¹.

Q. What conditions affect the feet?

A. Many types of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions can affect your feet and significantly impact your daily activities and livelihood. The most common conditions are:

Osteoarthritis (OA) was once thought to be an inevitable part of ageing, resulting from a lifetime of 'wear and tear' on joints. However, it's now understood that it's a complex condition and may occur due to many factors.

While OA can affect any of the joints in the feet, it commonly affects the big toe and the joints in the middle of the foot. It usually is the result of a prior injury or poor foot function.

Decreased movement or complete fusion of the big toe joint is common, and there may also be an associated bunion (bony lump on the outside of the joint) present in this area.

When OA affects the joints in the middle of the feet, prominent bony lumps called osteophytes may form on the top of the foot.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease that affects many joints in the body. RA may cause:

- pain, swelling and stiffness of foot joints
- clawing of the toes
- bunions
- flat feet.

It's important to note that many joint deformities are now prevented with early diagnosis and new, more effective treatments available for RA.

Gout is a common form of arthritis characterised by repeated attacks of extreme joint pain, swelling and redness. It occurs when uric acid builds up in the bloodstream and deposits urate crystals in the joint. The build-up of these crystals can lead to inflammation. The most commonly affected joint is in the big toe.



During an attack, the joint becomes red, hot, swollen, and extremely painful. While most other types of arthritis develop slowly, an attack of gout happens suddenly, often overnight.

[Psoriatic arthritis](#) is not very common, however it can affect the feet and cause the toes to swell. It's generally associated with psoriasis of the skin and nails; the skin may appear red, scaly and itchy, and the nails pitted and discoloured.

[A bunion](#) is a painful bony bump that forms on the joint of your big toe. A bunion develops when your big toe pushes against your next toe. Over time this changes the structure of the joint, causing the joint of your big toe to get bigger and stick out.

The shape and structure of your foot are something you inherit from your parents, and some foot types are more prone to bunions than others. Bunions may also be caused by inflammatory conditions such as [rheumatoid arthritis](#).

Wearing shoes that cause your toes to be confined and crowded – for example, shoes that are too tight, too narrow or high-heeled - may trigger bunions in people who are more susceptible to developing them.

Q. What treatments are available?

A. Some people can manage foot pain with self-care, such as [heat and cold packs](#), rest and [gentle exercise](#). However, other people will require medical treatment to manage.

In this case, your doctor may prescribe medicines to help you manage pain and/or inflammation.

Depending on the underlying condition causing the problem in your feet, your doctor may also prescribe other medicines – for example, to prevent gout attacks.

Q. What can I do to control my symptoms?

A. You can do many things to relieve your pain.

See a podiatrist. If you have foot pain, or a condition that affects your feet, seek the advice and expertise of a podiatrist. Podiatrists assess, diagnose and treat foot and lower limb problems. These may include skin and nail problems, foot and ankle injuries, foot complications related to medical conditions and issues with your gait or walking. Podiatrists can provide advice on appropriate footwear and can prescribe custom foot orthotics.

Take care of your feet. Wash and dry your feet regularly and thoroughly. Inspect them for anything unusual such as cuts, blisters, or changes to the nails and skin. By being aware of your feet and any changes that occur, you can seek professional advice when needed.

Be choosy with footwear. Purchase comfortable, properly fitted footwear. Look for light, flexible shoes with thick, non-slip soles. Shoes made of leather are preferable over synthetic materials as they breathe better. If laces are difficult to fasten due to arthritis in your hands, try using Velcro or elastic laces instead.

Wear orthotics. Corrective insoles can help reduce pain by redistributing pressure away from the painful area and supporting the arch of your foot. You can purchase off-the-shelf orthotics, or you can have orthotics made that are specifically fitted to your feet by a podiatrist.

Exercise. It's important to keep your joints moving where possible. Non-weight-bearing activities such as swimming can be very beneficial, particularly for foot pain, as they take the pressure away from the painful areas. A podiatrist or physiotherapist can help with this.

Q. What about surgery?

A. In some cases, [surgery](#) may be needed if all other treatments haven't worked. Your GP will refer you to an orthopaedic surgeon to discuss your options.



Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your musculoskeletal condition. They include:

- your doctor
- [podiatrist](#)
- [physiotherapist](#)
- [occupational therapist](#)
- [orthopaedic surgeon](#)
- Musculoskeletal Australia | msk.org.au | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, exercise, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).

More to explore

- [Arthritis of the foot and ankle](#)
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
- [Best shoes for arthritis: 8 rules for buying the right pair \(and 3 mistakes to avoid\)](#)
Creaky Joints
- [Bunions](#)
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
- [How arthritis strikes your feet, and 11 ways to heal your arthritis foot pain](#)
Creaky Joints
- [How does psoriatic arthritis affect your feet?](#)
Cleveland Clinic
- [Osteoarthritis \(OA\) of the foot and ankle](#)
Versus Arthritis
- [Rheumatoid arthritis of the foot and ankle](#)
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

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Reference

ⁱ [Chronic musculoskeletal conditions](#), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Accessed 2 August 2022.

